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FOR THE WOMAN HE LOVED; OR, FATEFUL LINKS.

BY AGNES MARY SHELTON,

AUTHOR OF "A BITTER MISTAKE," ETC., ETC.



SHE STOPPED BESIDE THE PROSTRATE FORM OF HIM SHE SOUGHT. VERY PALE AND STILL HE LAY BENEATH THE CALM EVENING SKY.

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OR,

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CHAPTER I.

AN ILL STARRED ADVENTURE.

RAVENHURST was a large, low, rambling house, built of red brick, and almost covered with ivy, which clung around its stone portico, and, when the wind was high, tapped, as if with ghostly fingers, against the long, narrow windows. Both outwardly and inwardly the once handsome mansion bore traces of neglect and decay, indicating either poverty or parsimony on the part of its owner, Mr. Matthew Gunthorpe. The garden resembled a wilderness, and within doors such of the rooms as were not shut up, but reserved for family use, looked dull and cheerless, with their faded carpets, old-fashioned furniture, and general absence of all usual ornaments.

The day had been lowering and chill, although the season was spring; but now, as evening approached, the sun struggled out from between masses of gray clouds, and shed a few bright rays into the small apartment specially dedicated to the use of the master of the house.

There he sat at his writing-table, sorting papers, making up accounts, and glancing over business documents, occasionally ceasing his labors in order to exchange a few sentences with his sister Sophia, a spinster of uncertain age, who for many years had been his chief confidant and adviser.

Matthew Gunthorpe was over fifty, and looked even more advanced in life.

His thin, sallow face was worn and furrowed, his scanty hair, once the deepest of fiery auburn, was thickly sprinkled with gray, and these rival hues also contrasted strongly in his long, straggling whiskers and unkempt mustache.

One of his small hazel eyes had a cast nearly degenerating into a decided squint, and the two were placed rather closely together under overhanging brows.

In spite of these drawbacks, however, Mr. Gunthorpe was not an exceptionally ill-favored man.

If his countenance had had either an amiable or intellectual expression, his general appearance would have passed muster.

Unfortunately, however, his prevailing characteristics—intense obstinacy, distrust and greed—were written too plainly in every line of his visage.

Suddenly he closed the ledger he had been consulting with a sharp snap, and irritably pushed it from him.

"Things are going badly with us, Sophia—very badly!"

Miss Gunthorpe laid down her knitting, and looked at her brother with some anxiety.

"You surely do not mean that those Arizona mines, from which you hoped so much, have turned out failures?"

"The shares have fallen low, and an opposition company has started. But that is not the worst. One or two still larger speculations have turned out ill; besides, I have lost several thousands by the failure of Grantley's bank. In short, Sophy, unless a tide of prosperity soon sets in my direction, I must sell Ravenhurst."

Sophia held up her hands in horror.

"Sell Ravenhurst, that has been in the family for years? Mat, you must be dreaming!"

"I wish you were right, for then I might awake to find luck had turned," he retorted, with a bitter smile. "But if I can neither raise another loan nor refund those already advanced, what else can be done?"

"There is Nerissa's money," observed Sophia, hesitatingly.

"You may be sure I have thought of that; but it is so securely tied up by her father's will until she is of age or marries, that I should find it very difficult to borrow anything on it, even though I could obtain the consent of Colonel La-celles, my co-trustee, who is at this moment with his regiment in Indian Territory.

"If Nerissa were of age we could easily persuade her to give whatever pecuniary assistance is needed. I often wonder what she will do or say when she discovers she is an heiress, for she is so heedless and void of sense that I question whether she bestows a thought on the subject, and you warned me it was best to keep her in ignorance."

"I did, for the reason that a girl's head becomes turned when she knows her own importance," he said, testily. "She would think of nothing but dress, gayety and lovers. Our quiet home would grow dull and distasteful to her; she would yearn for a season in New York and opportunities of making an eligible marriage. No, no, sister; it is well that Nerissa Marsden should blossom here like a wild flower, beautiful and innocent as those she gathers in the woods to form her sole adornment."

Miss Gunthorpe regarded her brother with an air of amazement.

"Good gracious, Matthew, you are growing quite poetical! Just fancy the folly of comparing Nerissa to a flower! A careless chit, running wild all day about the grounds, with tangled hair, a ragged frock, and a hat with the brim half torn away! If she resembles a flower it must be the ragged robin."

"You women always run down one another. Nerissa is very beautiful."

"To those who admire a baby face and sunburnt complexion, with tawny hair and eyes of an indescribable tint, neither blue nor gray. I cannot see any attraction in her."

"It is quite unnecessary that you should do so," said Matthew, with his cynical smile. "But has it never struck you, Sophia, that Nerissa's fortune, although not large, as fortunes now are reckoned, would be of considerable service to a needy man?"

"I suppose it would. I only wish that it was yours in this emergency."

"Why should it not be?"

"Only a minute ago," observed Miss Gunthorpe, sharply, "you talked as if you were powerless to touch a dollar."

"And so I am." Here he paused and covertly glanced at the spinster's firm, severe countenance, as if doubtful how she would receive his next sentence. "You know, Sophia, that when Nerissa marries, not only will she have control over her property, but her husband, if he is a clever fellow, can also get a goodly share into his own hands."

A red flush rose in Miss Sophia's face, mantling even to the tip of her long, thin nose, as she comprehended the drift of her brother's speech.

Ever since his wife's death, some fifteen years ago, she had reigned lady paramount at Ravenhurst.

It was not likely she was going to resign that supremacy without a struggle.

"Do I understand you aright, Matthew?" she asked, with icy majesty. "You, a man of mature years, who since poor Arabella died have never shown the slightest inclination to marry again, are now thinking of marrying a harum-scarum girl, who ever since she came from the West, nearly ten years ago, has been the plague of my life!"

"Softly, softly, Sophia. You take too severe a view of a young girl's whims. Remember, we have found the liberal sum awarded by the late general to those who should take charge of his daughter during her minority extremely useful. Some persons might be ill-natured enough to hint that Nerissa's faults and follies are owing—I do not say to the training and education you have given her, but rather to the absence of those essentials

for forming the youthful mind. Confess, my dear sister, you have a little neglected her."

Miss Gunthorpe turned a still deeper red at this implied reproach.

"You are unreasonable, Matthew. I am sure that during her childhood I tormented myself with hearing those wearisome lessons day after day, while that half hour's superintendence of the practice of those interminable scales turned my hair gray at least five years before the proper time. I did it all for your sake, to save the expense of a properly-qualified governess, and this is my reward!"

"I was only joking, Sophia."

"I believe the girl has bewitched you," she grumbled, "although you pretend that her money is her chief attraction."

He made no answer. Indeed, he scarcely knew clearly whether love or avarice was the basis of his strong desire to make Nerissa Marsden his wife—Nerissa, a girl young enough to be his daughter, beautiful, lively, and impulsive, a very type of innocent maidenhood, besides possessing the solid charm of an inheritance which would enrich the husband of her selection.

With Matthew speculation had become a mania. He looked upon it as the high road to the wealth for which his soul craved and notwithstanding repeated disappointments, was ever ready to fling fresh gold into the vortex that long ago had swallowed up his own small means.

General Marsden could scarcely have chosen a less trustworthy guardian for his only child, but the gallant officer did not know. He and Mat Gunthorpe had been college chums, and had corresponded at intervals during his long years of service. Miss Sophia's virtues had been duly extolled in her brother's correspondence, so the general might be pardoned for having considered the pair fully qualified to undertake the charge of his most precious treasure when he was removed.

While Nerissa's fate was being discussed by those who never paused to consider whether their schemes were calculated to promote her happiness, the girl herself was wandering about the grounds, singing loud in her clear sweet voice wild snatches of melody, such as she might have learned from her feathered favorites of the woods. Sometimes she would gather a cluster of flowers, and place them carelessly amidst the masses of golden-brown hair that curled closely round her shapely head; or, if they seemed specially worthy of admiration, the old straw hat, disparaged by Miss Sophia, formed an excellent substitute for a basket in which to convey them safely home, to decorate her simply-appointed chamber. When she was tired, the bough of a tree, whose lowest branches nearly reached the ground, became her seat, where she swayed gently to and fro, indulging in bright day-dreams of the unknown future, which, to the young, bears promise of so much happiness.

It was sweet to Nerissa to be alone amid trees and flowers, with the open sky above her head, out of reach of Sophia's grumbling tones.

One day, however, these pleasures failed to yield satisfaction; so she left the grounds by a side-gate, and sauntered down the country road.

At a short distance from where she walked rose a high embankment, along which ran a line of railway, and she knew that in a minute or two the express would pass on its way from Bridgeport, the nearest town, to New York.

She liked to watch the great iron monster pursue its furious career; to notice the strange faces peering from the windows of the carriages—some young and beaming with happiness, others worn and anxious.

In that momentary glimpse she often found materials for weaving a romance in her busy brain—for the wayward girl had a sentimental turn of mind, which was fostered by her almost solitary life, deprived of all congenial companionship and the amusements suited to her age.

Puff, puff!

The train was rapidly advancing, and she stood still to see it pass, wondering whether it would ever bear her to the great metropolis—the unknown world where so many marvelous sights were to be seen.

A sort of commotion on one of the platforms attracted her attention.

What are those men doing?

They are struggling—fighting.

As she gazed, to her horror and amazement, one of them either leaped from the train or was thrown out of it.

The iron horse dashed on at full speed, while the slight, dark figure rolled down the steep embankment, and was lost to view.

A cry of horror rose to Nerissa's lips; her heart throbbed violently.

The train was already nearly out of sight, leaving behind this stranger, who might, she thought be dead, or at least seriously injured.

Intently she watched to see whether he would again become visible, and strained her ears lest a cry for help should be vainly uttered. All was silent save for the twittering of the birds in the trees, and for the lowing of cattle in a distant field.

She could not bear to leave the place, even to summon assistance, for he might die unwatched and alone before her return, a thought that made her shudder.

Impelled by pity, flavored by a slight tincture of womanly curiosity, she at last hastened toward the spot where he must still be lying, making her way amid the long grass, pushing aside shrubs and brambles that impeded her progress, until she stopped beside the prostrate form of him she sought.

Very pale and still he lay beneath the calm evening sky.

A tall, dark-haired man, whose age might be a few years over twenty, with a well-chiseled face, down one side of which blood was slowly trickling from a wound on the temple, inflicted by a sharp stone.

Nerissa knelt down beside him, and, conquering her nervous fears, laid her hand upon his heart. It was beating still, and with renewed hope she hurried to a little brook that ran at no great distance, and dipping her handkerchief in its clean waters, returned to the unconscious man, and gently wiped the blood-stains from his brow.

Then, remembering that Miss Sophia's scent-bottle, which she had been desired to bring down-stairs for its owner's use before she started on her ramble, was still in her pocket, she applied the strong essence to the young man's nostrils. It seemed to revive him.

He opened his eyes, gazed about rather wildly, and said, in an agitated voice: "Have those men gone?—am I free?"

She knew not whether his brain wandered, or what answer to make.

"You have had a severe fall. You are alone with me. Had you any friends on the train?" she said, hesitatingly.

"I recollect all now," he murmured, passing his hand across his throbbing brow. "I must not linger here, or they will be on my track, and I shall have risked my life in vain."

"Whom do you fear?" she asked, as he attempted to rise, and fell back again with a groan.

"Dear lady, may I trust you? You have a kind face, and will not betray me. I am charged with a crime of which I am guiltless. Yet, in order to shield one whom I love, I dare not make my innocence apparent. I have just escaped from the hands of the police. In the railway carriage I managed to slip my handcuffs and make a last effort for liberty. You will not give me back to a fate worse than death?"

Breathlessly he poured forth the words, lifting imploring eyes to Nerissa's face; and the girl's impulsive feelings were strangely stirred.

"What can I do?" she faltered. "I would help you if I could."

"Thanks for those gracious words. They give me fresh courage. I find that I have sprained my ankle. It is intensely painful, but

I must manage to drag myself to yonder woods, which, perhaps, will afford me shelter for the night. To-morrow I must think what can next be done. Lady, if inquiries should be made, you will not breathe a word of having seen or spoken with me? You will keep my secret, will you?" pleadingly.

"I promise," she answered, with a firm determination to keep her word.

Slowly and painfully he arose, and dragged himself a few yards onward, Nerissa watching him with an ever-increasing compassion.

Poor fellow! he was weak and suffering, and wrongfully accused by his enemies. If, for the sake of some beloved friend, he had taken a burden of guilt upon his own shoulders, it seemed to her the perfection of self-sacrifice.

When he disappeared among the trees, she went slowly home to the oak-paneled parlor, where Matthew generally dozed over his newspaper, while Sophia knitted stockings or played "solitaire."

In the tumult of her mind she did not notice that her guardian and his sister were embarrassed and ill at ease, sometimes glancing at her askance with strange scrutiny. She knew not that, after a stormy debate, they had succeeded in amicably settling their differences, and arrived at the conclusion that, after all, Matthew Gunthorpe could not do better than espouse "the insignificant chit," Nerissa Marsden, and her fortune.

So, in happy unconsciousness of the coming struggle, she sat in her favorite corner by the window, listening to the wind moaning amid the trees as evening shadows gathered, and wondering how the unknown fared in those dreary woods, with no other canopy but the heavens above him.

CHAPTER II.

THE STORY OF A LIFE.

NERISSA passed a sleepless night; she felt as though burdened by fate with a heavy responsibility.

This stranger had been thrown in her path. He was suffering and oppressed.

Was she not bound to succor him?

Had she been older or more experienced she might have looked upon him merely as a criminal fleeing from justice; or at least have weighed the probabilities of his guilt or innocence.

As it was, she implicitly believed his assurances, though she could have given no satisfactory reason to account for her conviction.

She resolved to visit the woods next day, taking with her a basket containing such provisions as she could abstract from the larder without rousing the suspicions of Miss Sophia, or Hannah, the cook; and as she was accustomed, when the weather was fine, to spend the whole morning out of doors, rambling about the woods, her absence from home would not excite observation.

One thought troubled her. Perhaps the fugitive had been again seized, and conveyed to that dark and loathsome dungeon which was Nerissa's idea of a prison cell.

The sun, which was peeping brightly through the curtains, dispelled this gloomy reflection.

She sprang from her couch with alacrity, and throwing open the window, looked out upon the thousand natural beauties of a fine spring morning.

The dewy grass sparkled in the sunbeams; the tangled flowers of the neglected garden had beautiful tints and rich perfumes. A few bright-winged butterflies were already skimming through the air to pay morning calls upon their floral favorites, and the birds greeted day with a harmonious concert.

Nerissa became more cheerful. She sung her gayest songs while completing her toilet, and entered the breakfast-parlor so bonny and blooming, that Matthew Gunthorpe's small eyes twinkled with new light as he thought that this fair young creature was marked for his own.

Miss Sophia presided as usual at the table. She scarcely noticed Nerissa's greeting, so

much was she engrossed by the news, just heard from one of the servants, which she was retailing to her brother.

"Such a terrible catastrophe! And its occurring so near seems to make it worse, though I don't exactly know why. Just fancy, Matthew, four cars broken into splinters, nine passengers killed, and I know not how many injured! It really makes one shudder."

"What has happened?" asked the girl, with a vague impression that anything new and startling must have some connection with yesterday's adventure.

"A railway accident, my dear," explained Mr. Gunthorpe, attempting to blend in his manner the character of both guardian and lover. "The 6:30 express from Bridgeport to New York came in collision with a number of freight cars, that by an unfortunate mischance were left upon the track. The result would have been still more fatal had not the train been slackening speed at the moment; but it is bad enough as it is."

"I think so, indeed!" chimed in Miss Sophia. "Engine-driver and stoker not expected to live; poor Jones, the grocer, killed—he was a civil man, though I sometimes complained that he gave short weight; then there was a woman and her baby, and, what was strange, two policemen and their prisoner."

"Was the prisoner killed?" asked Nerissa, doubtfully.

"Have I not said so?" was the sharp rejoinder. "His features were so crushed and mutilated that they would not be recognizable by his nearest friend; but he was close beside the other men, and people remember having seen them enter the cars at Bridgeport."

"Perhaps they are mistaken," murmured Nerissa; then stopped, confused, on observing the eyes of her companions fixed on her surprise; while Miss Sophia remarked, in reproachful accents, "that it was wonderful how fond some persons were of contradiction!"

As the meal progressed, Matthew addressed a few remarks to his fair ward with a sort of clumsy gallantry which sat ill upon him; but her mind was so preoccupied that she did not notice the change in his manner.

She was the first to rise from the table, impatient to set forth on her mission, but Mr. Gunthorpe laid a restraining hand upon her arm.

"Can you spare me half an hour, my dear Nerissa? I wish to speak to you on a subject of the deepest importance."

Never before in her remembrance had her guardian desired a *tete-a-tete*.

Her heart began to flutter. Perhaps he had heard what happened on the previous evening, and was about to vent his indignation upon her.

"I hope you are not going to scold me," she said.

"Scold you, my dear girl? I prize you far too highly, love you much too well, to do that. How fortunate I should esteem myself if you would only let me devote my life to making you happy!"

Sophia had discreetly withdrawn. Mr. Gunthorpe seized Nerissa's hand, gazing upon her with lover-like tenderness; while she, although somewhat startled at the sudden transformation, in her simplicity had no suspicion that she was about to be honored by her first offer of marriage.

"Do you really wish to make me happy?" she asked, after a short pause, wherein her mind revolved all kinds of agreeable possibilities.

"It is my dearest hope, sweet Nerissa."

"Then perhaps you would not mind asking Miss Sophia to get me one or two new dresses I want them so badly. I hear, too, that a traveling circus will give a performance in the village to-morrow. Will you let me go there?"

"You do not understand me," he interrupted, impatiently. "Such things as you mention are mere trifles unworthy of a moment's

consideration. The happiness to which I referred would last through life."

"I was afraid you would refuse," sighed the girl, who hoped that in her guardian's present state of mind he might be induced to grant one or two small favors. "I have so little amusement."

"It would be different if we were married," he answered, eagerly. "I should be so proud of my pretty young bride! Be my wife, Nerissa, and I will take you abroad—to London, Paris, wherever you care to go. You shall have fine dresses, jewels, anything that takes your fancy. Ah, my sweet one, you shall never repent being Mrs. Matthew Gunthorpe!"

"I your wife!" she exclaimed in consternation, forcibly withdrawing her hand and springing to her feet. "Mr. Gunthorpe, surely you are not in your right senses!"

His brow knitted into an ominous frown.

"This is a strange reception of my proposal, Nerissa."

"Not stranger than it deserves. Why should I marry unless I fall in love?—and of course I cannot fall in love with you!"

"And why should we not be very happy even without that ridiculous passion which is talked of more often than felt? If I made an indulgent husband you would have no reason to complain; and, young as you are you would soon learn to perform your duties as a wife. You like me already, Nerissa, do you not?"

"Yes," very hesitatingly. "I could not dislike poor papa's friend."

"That is sufficient for the present! warmer feelings will come by-and-by. The affair is settled. You must regard me as your future husband. The marriage shall take place shortly."

"No, no!" she cried, vehemently, as he attempted to place his arm around her. "I will not be forced into an engagement from which my heart revolts. You never can persuade me to marry you!"

"Obstinate fool!" he cried, losing his temper. "Do you think I cannot bend you to my will? You depend on me for the very roof that covers you, as well as the bread you eat! What will become of you if I turn you from my doors?"

"Heaven will raise up new friends to help me!" exclaimed Nerissa.

"You are brave because you have never known real trouble; but do not think you will escape me. I am a firm man; my enemies call me obstinate. We shall see whether the strength of my will cannot conquer yours!"

"At least, you cannot drag me to church!" said the undaunted Nerissa, as, anxious to terminate the discussion, she hurried from the room.

Before half an hour was over she was on her way to the woods, where she supposed the fugitive was still biding. It cannot be denied that Mr. Gunthorpe's declaration had made her uncomfortable; but she was far from being subdued. She marveled that a man at his age could so degrade himself in the eyes of a girl young enough to be his granddaughter.

Yet there was something ludicrous in the notion of a gray-haired man choosing a giddy girl of seventeen for his wife; and when she thought of Miss Sophia meekly surrendering the housekeeping keys, and taking the second place in the household, scandalized by the extravagance and mismanagement of her brother's bride, she laughed outright.

Reaching her destination, she had hardly entered the woods when she perceived her new acquaintance limping toward her. In the bright morning sunshine he looked haggard and worn, but his face lighted up when he saw Nerissa, whom he welcomed with many expressions of gratitude.

"I scarcely dared hope to see you. Yet there was such a gleam of compassion in your eyes yesterday that I could not help believing that you would come to my aid. All last night I lay in the hollow of a tree, far in the depths of that forest; and before I slept, I prayed, as I once did as a child at my mother's

knee, that you might be rewarded for your charity. But now what am I to do? My ankle is so painful that I cannot walk far. If I go into the village for food, people may look suspiciously upon me, a stranger. I am already half famished."

"I have brought you food," she said, displaying the contents of her basket.

While he, seated upon the trunk of a felled tree, made a hearty meal from the viands she had brought, Nerissa gave him the news of the railway accident.

"Fate is kind," he said, "in removing these men at such a critical moment. It must have been through their signals that the train slackened speed. Death frustrated their determination to pursue and recapture me. So perish all the enemies of Everard Vaughan!"

Nerissa was shocked.

"These were not your enemies!" she said, indignantly. "They were only doing their duty."

"Ah, do not turn against me," he murmured, in a soft, melodious voice. "You have been my friend, and, outcast as I am, have won my eternal gratitude. Pardon me if I have spoken bitterly; believe me, I have been severely tried. Accused of a crime which I never committed; the woman whom I dearly loved lost to me forever; do you wish me to turn hypocrite, and use smooth words, when the language of demons would not express the bitterness I feel?"

The tide of pity surged once more about Nerissa's heart. He was so young to undergo such troubles, the more so when they were undeserved!

"Take heart," she said, softly; "all may yet be well."

He shook his head despondently.

"Something has gone out of my life which cannot be restored to it. Hope, love and trust—all have vanished."

In spite of dusty clothes, disordered hair and haggard visage, Everard Vaughan was still remarkably handsome; and, say what we will, the feminine heart is peculiarly susceptible to the influence of good looks in the opposite sex.

Nerissa might not have taken the same interest in the confessions of an older and plainer man; but, gazing at that slender, well-knit frame, and those velvety dark eyes, she longed to hear the story of his life.

He seemed to read her thoughts, and remarked: "It is only right I should tell you something about myself and the crime with which they charge me," he said.

"You would scarcely suppose, seeing me here in misery and degradation, that I come of a good family."

"My father was the third son, and being extravagant, soon ran through his moderate inheritance."

"He died when I was a lad of eighteen, leaving me nearly penniless."

"Through want of means, I was not educated for any profession, and my father was too proud to let me learn a trade."

"How could I get my living?"

"A bright idea struck me."

"I had always a predilection for the stage, so my mind was made up to become an actor."

"After some difficulty I succeeded in getting an engagement at a minor theater, but either I wanted talent or perseverance, and made no great hit."

"But the turning point of my life now arrived—I met her who was my fate."

"You fell in love?" cried Nerissa, deeply interested. "Was the lady beautiful?"

"In my eyes she possessed more than mortal beauty."

"Was she an actress?"

"Yes; and her husband joined our company after making a successful tour through the States."

Nerissa's countenance fell.

"Then she was married, and yet you say you loved her?"

"I could not help it. Believe me, I struggled against my passion; but all in vain."

"She was a fair, queenly creature, born to rule over the hearts of men; she soon totally subjugated mine."

"Her husband was an idle, reckless fellow, who passed his leisure time in haunts where his wife could not penetrate, where the bottle was circulated too freely."

"On such occasions he would return home in a morose and savage humor, and she was made the victim of his wrath."

"She had married him for love, against the wishes of her friends, and bitterly did she repent her bargain."

"I acted with her in many melodramas, where her beauty and spirit infused life into the whole performance; and when, as her lover, fortune so far favored me as to give me such a part—I felt the touch of her hand, or her breath upon my cheek, I became as one inspired."

"Those who knew me, wondered at the talent I would then exhibit."

"And thus things went on for awhile—"

"And then?" questioned Nerissa, finding that he paused abruptly.

"Then came a day when there was discovered a room in disorder, the furniture broken, the carpet drenched with blood, and in the middle of the floor lay the dead body of a man with a dagger through the heart."

"You killed him, then?" exclaimed Nerissa, shuddering, as she shrunk away from her companion with dilated eyes and quivering lips; "yet you told me you were guiltless!"

"So I am. I will swear ten thousand times that his blood is not on my head!"

Perceiving the expression of incredulity and astonishment with which she regarded him, he continued, earnestly:

"I repeat that I had no hand in his death. I neither stole upon him with the crafty purpose of the midnight assassin, nor in the heat of passion did I stain my soul with murder. But I fled."

"Why did you flee, when you are innocent?"

"Because I dared not face the terrible array of evidence against me, and I could not divulge the truth. I was suspected and hunted down. A felon's doom loomed darkly before me. Careless whether I lived or died, I made a leap for freedom—anything rather than the gallows! And here I am!"

The impress of truth seemed to be stamped on his words, and strange though his narrative was, she was forced to believe him.

"Who, then, took the life of the unhappy man?" she asked, in an awe-struck whisper. "Is it possible that he committed self-destruction?"

"Do not let us talk of him longer. Your girlish heart should not be saddened by tales of sorrow or crime. I cannot tell you more than I have done."

Everard Vaughan now began to speak on the subject he had most at heart—that of escaping from the clutches of the law. He was doubtful whether the detective who took him on the platform of the Bridgeport station had had time to telegraph to Pinkerton's; and even if the authorities there knew of his arrest, they might suppose he had met the fate of their subordinates.

He proposed to conceal himself in the wood, now thick with summer foliage, until his ankle was strong enough, and he could travel on foot to some seaport town, whence he could work his passage on board some ship bound for a foreign country.

He had managed to secrete a small store of money, but if he appeared in the village to purchase the necessities of life lame, haggard, and wretched, he might excite attention, and finally suspicion.

Throwing himself at Nerissa's feet, he implored her to finish the good work she had begun.

It was only for a short time, he urged, that he should trespass on her goodness—a few days—a week or two at most, and he would trouble her no more.

His entreaties did not fall upon deaf ears. Before Nerissa left him to return to her gloomy home, now even more distasteful to her, she promised to continue her visits to the wood at certain intervals, and Everard Vaughan knew he could depend upon her word.

CHAPTER III.

A FATAL STEP.

On the border of the woods which lay to the west of the village stood a solitary, low-roofed hut, inhabited by an ancient dame named Dorothy Trent.

Her once tall figure was bent half-double by rheumatism even more than age; her snow-white hair was loosely twisted under a black silk handkerchief, wreathed turban-fashion round her head, whence escaped long tangled locks, framing a shriveled visage, with a rather malevolent expression.

It was well for Dorothy that she lived in times when the belief in witchcraft is confined to a few of the most ignorant, or she might have been offered as another victim upon the shrine of superstition. As it was, people shrunk from her pathway when she walked through the village muttering to herself. She was very deaf, which might have accounted for the habit. Some pronounced her to be crazy; others alleged that she had "the evil eye."

In reality the old woman was neither mad nor gifted with supernatural powers, although somewhat eccentric from having lived so long alone and having seen much trouble. Nerissa had met her when quite a child in some of her country rambles, and attracted rather than daunted by her strange appearance, made overtures toward acquaintanceship, at first by gifts of flowers and fruit, and afterward by small presents of money.

Old Dorothy did not repulse her advances; so it happened that for several years Miss Marsden had been a frequent visitor to the dilapidated cottage, where previously visitors were as things unknown.

It was a sultry day in the beginning of July when Nerissa entered the low-ceilinged room where Dorothy sat close to the fire, which even in the warmest weather was essential to her comfort.

"We have been expecting you these last two days, Miss Nerissa. He has been wearying for you to come."

"I could not get away before; you know I am not free now to come and go exactly at my own pleasure."

"Ah, poor bird! your wings have been clipped at last."

"How is your patient?" asked Nerissa, changing the subject.

"Getting well by degrees, though he has had a sharp attack of fever, mind you; and I scarcely thought to bring him through it. If he had died I might have got into trouble—all on your account—for not calling in the doctor."

"Well, never mind, Dorothy, since all has turned out well. Your decoctions of herbs have proved as efficacious as a doctor's prescription, and I told you at the first that my friend had a perfect horror of doctors."

"So you did, Miss Nerissa, and it was no business of mine whether he lived or died."

"Surely you are glad to have been the instrument of saving a human life?"

"I am glad to have been able to oblige you, Miss Nerissa, though I am thinking that your guardian would not be best pleased to know what an interest you take in this good-looking young friend of yours!"

This speech, uttered meaningfully, brought no blush to Nerissa's cheek.

"He can scarcely be called a friend," she said, quietly, "but I pity his forlorn condition. When he is well he will leave Bridgeport, and we may never see him again."

A click of the latch; Everard Vaughan stood in the doorway, attenuated by illness, tall and gaunt. His careworn face brightened as he took a seat near Nerissa.

"I thought you were forgetting me. But no; I will not wrong you by a doubt—you have proved your goodness. And now do you not see how strong and well I am growing? Soon you will be rid of me forever."

She smiled, but her smile was followed by a sigh. He noticed her usually rosy color had faded, and her eyelids bore traces of recent tears.

"You are ill!" he exclaimed, anxiously.

"Not ill, but very unhappy."

The ready tears rose in her eyes. She had been harassed and tormented lately almost beyond endurance, and the sympathy Everard evinced found its way to her heart.

"Yet there is no reason why I should keep my troubles secret," she said, "and I have no one to guide or advise me. You may have forgotten my telling you that I had a guardian, an old, grumpy, disagreeable man, whom I never liked, and now thoroughly detest. Well, he insists that I shall marry him."

She said this with such a tragic air that Everard could scarcely avoid smiling.

"One cannot be surprised at his desire; but if you do not share it, why, dismiss your importunate suitor."

"Oh, if I only could! You do not understand. When he found that fair words would not move me, he had recourse to menaces, even to violence. I have bruises now upon my arm caused by his cruel fingers when he forced me to stay and listen to him. His sister is just as bad. They threaten to keep me a prisoner in my own room until I promise to marry him."

"The monsters! But have you no relative or friend who could interfere on your behalf?"

She shook her head sadly.

"I am the last of my family. There is another trustee somewhere in the West, but Mr. Gunthorpe takes care never to let me know his address. He and his sister have always kept me secluded; so I have no friends."

"You are too young and pretty to venture forth into the world alone," he said, glancing at her fragile form and child-like face, "or I should say be independent, leave their house, and, if necessary, earn your own living."

"But how?" she demanded, anxiously.

"You could be a governess."

"I am afraid I am not clever enough. Miss Sophia has never sent me to school. Then I am not skillful with my needle, like some girls. I could not be a milliner or dressmaker."

"Could you go upon the stage?" he hazarded.

But the very notion was distasteful to the unsophisticated girl, who considered a first appearance in public only a shade less terrible than marrying Matthew Gunthorpe.

For the moment, Everard had no other alternative to offer.

"I am a bad hand at giving advice worth taking," he said, smiling; "but if your aversion to your guardian's wooing proceeds from a preference for some more favored suitor, why not marry him at once, and thus settle the question?"

"I have no lover!" she answered, petulantly. "I hate all such nonsense!"

"Then you have never known life's sweetest joys and keenest sorrows."

"One may know a great deal of happiness without being in love," said Nerissa, wisely.

"I was happy enough with my pet birds and flowers, although I used sometimes to want a little change and amusement, until Mr. Gunthorpe began to pester me with his absurd love-making."

"You will one day change your mind."

"Why should I? I like my freedom."

He smiled a little sadly as he looked upon this young, untamed thing rebelling against the very thought of bondage.

Would she ever become amenable to love's soft discipline?

"I am very selfish to stay here talking about myself," she resumed, more brightly. "And, oh, Mr. Vaughan, I had nearly forgotten to give you a piece of news I overheard Miss

Sophia telling her brother yesterday. Inquiries have been made concerning the man who was killed in the railway accident."

"You mean the man whose corpse was supposed to be mine?" he interrupted quickly, turning a shade more pale.

"Y-s; but his clothes and watch have been identified. He had been for the last four years in Australia it seems, and his family did not know until lately that he had returned. Poor fellow, it was indeed sad to lose his life when within so short a distance from home and friends."

Everard Vaughan rose from his seat and paced the room in agitation.

"Do you not see, Miss Nerissa, that this discovery increases my danger?"

"No one would think of looking for you here," she replied confidently.

"We cannot tell. These men employed to hunt out criminals are like bloodhounds on the track; no possibility escapes them. I must disguise myself as well as I can, and leave this neighborhood."

The clock in the chimney-corner struck the hour. It was later than Nerissa supposed.

She bade brief adieux to Everard and old Dorothy—the latter had been dozing over the fire, since her deafness made the conversation inaudible beyond a few stray sentences—and was soon hurriedly making her way homeward.

In the gloomy avenue of elms leading to the principal entrance of Ravenhurst she met her guardian, grim and severe of aspect, his small eyes literally ablaze with indignation.

"I was coming in search of you, Nerissa. How dare you absent yourself from home without either my consent or that of Sophia?"

"I have never been kept a prisoner," replied the girl sullenly. "For years I have passed hours out of doors daily, neither you nor your sister troubling yourselves whither I went or when I returned, so that I was not in your way."

"All is different now," he answered, his bony fingers tightening on her wrist until she could have cried aloud with pain. "You were then a child, and we allowed you a child's freedom; now you are a woman, and my destined wife."

"That I will never be, as I have often told you!"

"I pay no attention to your caprices. It is but a question of time when I will make you submit to my fixed determination, and become my own for life."

Suddenly she stopped, and addressed him with quivering lips and eyes that gleamed brightly through rising tears.

"Mr. Gunthorpe, why should you desire to condemn me to a miserable future? I cannot love; if I were your wife I might learn to hate you. My dear father trusted you as a friend; do not let his child have reason to regard you as an enemy. Let me have the money he bequeathed to me. I know not whether the sum will be great or small, but it will be enough to afford me subsistence. Then I will quit Ravenhurst forever, and you shall soon forget me."

She had never before referred to her father's will, or shown any knowledge of the inheritance which one day must be hers.

"You will not be of age for full three years," he said, doggedly; "and until then you are under my control. I decline at the present time to even attempt a settlement of the trifling property left by my friend Marsden. It was to be invested for your benefit until you were twenty-one or got married to a suitable person. You shall have the paltry sum when you marry me."

"And if I chose to wed any one else," she asked, defiantly, "it would equally be mine?"

"Nerissa, you talk like a child. Do you imagine that I am such a weak fool as to allow you opportunities to obtain a lover or husband? I will immure you in yonder house as if you

were in a convent cell. I will watch over you as jealously as a jailer, until, worn out and weary, you will give your consent to our union. Then, Nerissa, the stern guardian shall give place to the adoring husband, for I love you."

And, placing his arm around her shrinking form, he forced her toward the house.

That evening, when the sky had darkened over with clouds, and thunder rolled in the distance, Nerissa came through the pelting rain—a forlorn, bedraggled little figure—to Dorothy's cottage, and had a second interview with Everard Vaughan.

Long and earnestly they talked together. The young man expostulated, the girl persisted. Her eyes were glowing, her hands were burning with fever; she had the distraught air of one driven to desperation.

"If you consider you have cause to be grateful to me," she said, "you will not refuse to do as I wish."

"But I fear you may repent taking such a rash step, Miss Nerissa."

"No, no; it is you who are unwilling to barter your liberty. Yet if you have really loved, and she whom you love is lost to you forever, I do not ask a great sacrifice. See, I have brought some trinkets that belonged to my mother. They are of no great value, but may raise sufficient money to carry you away from America. As for me, I remain here until Matthew Gunthorpe gives up the money that I can then force from him."

"Nerissa," he said, gravely, as he watched her excitement with the compassion a man must ever feel for a weak woman's folly, "I warn you that you are running a great risk without gaining any compensating advantage. If I am married to you by the justice of the peace at Bridgeport disguised and in a feigned name, do you imagine that your guardian would at once cease to annoy you, and yield up whatever property may be yours under your late father's will?"

"He must. He owed to me this morning that such were the conditions."

"But I could not bear to leave you to his fury when he found himself baffled."

"I do not suppose that he will kill me," said Nerissa, reflectively; "and as he struck me this morning—yes, with his hard, cruel hand—I have no greater indignity to fear. Go through the ceremony, and give me the certificate which will vouch for my marriage, and then we will say good-by, never, most likely, to cross each other's paths again."

Everard Vaughan was an unscrupulous man, of no fixed principles, but he felt a twinge of conscience in agreeing to Nerissa's desperate proposition.

Yet, after all, not much harm could come of it, since such a marriage would constitute no real bond between them; while the reward offered for his compliance—namely, those few old-fashioned trinkets worn by a happy wife in days long passed away—would smooth away his difficulties, and provide means for his journey to some distant country.

Young and beautiful as Nerissa was, he had no wish to persuade her to link her fate with his and leave Bridgeport in his company.

The embers of a former passion were not quite extinguished, and he could love no other woman save her who had enslaved him. He had fully performed his duty in his own estimation by cautioning the headstrong girl to pause before she perpetrated an act of reckless folly; if she chose to disregard his warning she must suffer the consequences.

"It shall be as you wish," he said.

And Nerissa smiled her thanks, already, in imagination, gloating over Mr. Gunthorpe's discomfiture.

Early one morning a lady and gentleman left the Bridgeport railway station arm in arm, and choosing the most quiet and unfrequented streets, made their way toward the office of the justice.

The lady was plainly dressed, and wore so thick a veil that her features were not distinguishable. The gentleman had a long black beard, concealing the lower part of his face, a quantity of straight black hair hanging down over his coat collar, and blue spectacles. His figure, too, was not at all prepossessing, as he was extremely round-shouldered.

This pair were, of course, no other than Everard and Nerissa.

"I scarcely knew you," she whispered, as they walked swiftly on; "although you told me what disguise you had prepared, I had no idea it would be so effectual. Do you not feel very strange with your padded shoulders and false beard?"

"You know I have appeared in this guise once or twice already when I went to the office to give the necessary notices, so am beginning to be reconciled to the inconvenience it entails. I have chosen Mr. William Lee for my *ali s*, because it is common and unassuming."

"One name is as good as another," she replied, carelessly. "How astonished my venerated guardian and his sister will be when they find I am a married woman!"

"By the way, how did you manage to elude their vigilance?"

"Nothing was easier. Mr. Gunthorpe started yesterday for New York, where, fortunately for me, he had some important business to transact, and Miss Sophia was left in charge. This morning was devoted to making up her housekeeping accounts, so as she wished not to be disturbed she slyly turned the key in my door, imagining that I was in safe keeping. But Hannah, the cook, is a dear old soul, and I bribed her with kisses and ribbons to set me free whenever Miss Sophia makes me a prisoner."

"So Miss Sophia does not suspect that her bird has flown? But here we are! Once more, Nerissa, are you bent upon this folly?"

"A thousand times, yes! It is my revenge on Mr. Gunthorpe for his cruelty. He shall be made to feel that his firm will cannot subdue mine."

They passed into the office, which looked dark and dismal after the sunshine in the streets.

Nerissa's heart began to beat violently, and for the first time a suspicion that this reckless step might one day cause a bitter repentance crossed her mind.

But it was too late to retract. She heard like one in a dream a strange voice asking questions to which she gave the answers required.

The final declaration was made, their names were signed in the registrar's book, and with a start, as if awakened from a troubled sleep, Nerissa Marsden heard herself addressed as Mrs. William Lee, while the marriage certificate, which she had risked so much to gain, was placed in her hands.

She trembled so violently, and her face bore such a ghastly hue, that Everard feared she was about to faint, so he hastily led her into the street. The fresh air revived her, and she smiled faintly.

"So it is over, and I have had my willful way!"

"Nerissa, your courage is failing already. I regret that I ever agreed to carry out your whim."

"Whatever happens, you were not to blame; the fault and punishment will both be mine. We must not stay here longer; I shall lose the train that takes me back to Ravenhurst."

Everard murmured a few incoherent words of farewell as he pressed her unresisting hand, then glided swiftly away down the narrow street, in search of some secure hiding-place where he might remain until he could start for New York by the mail train.

Nerissa was left standing there alone. She felt more friendless than ever, now he had gone, and dreaded, more than she could have supposed possible, the consequences of the communication she was about to make to her per-

sistent wooer at Ravenhurst. Only one thing was clear to her perturbed mind, and gave her comfort. Mr. Gunthorpe would find that his schemes had encountered an insurmountable obstacle, as he could scarcely expect her to commit bigamy even for his sake.

CHAPTER IV.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

In a quiet New York street, at some distance from the fashionable quarters of the town, stood a large but unpretentious-looking house, with a board placed in a prominent position over the door, bearing the inscription, "Temporary Home for Destitute Women."

Here, gathered together by the hand of charity, were females of all ages, some bowed by years and infirmities, others scarcely more than children, but all bearing the stamp of poverty, combined in many cases with sickness and misery. The "Home," was supported by subscription; and subscribers only had the privilege of recommending deserving cases which were brought under their notice. Neither vice, therefore, nor confirmed mendicancy were likely to find admittance.

In the matron's room—a small apartment, plainly furnished, but with some regard to comfort—sat a young girl, thin even to attenuation, pale and ill-clad, yet bearing that unmistakable impress which marks those who have been well-born and bred.

The shabby dress worn by Nerissa—for it was she—had been carefully mended, and was put on neatly, while her golden-brown hair, so long and luxuriant that a queen might envy such a crown, was wreathed around her small head with unstudied grace.

As Miss Wilton, the matron, looked at her drooping face and delicate hands, evidently unused to labor, she understood that this girl had a history.

"Doctor Treherne will be here presently," she said, glancing at the timepiece. "I think he will find that the improvement in your health is maintained and you are already stronger."

"Thanks to his kindness and your care," returned Nerissa, gratefully. "Indeed, madam, I think the cause of my falling into the swoon which alarmed my landlady in Blank street was want of food. She did not know that for days I subsisted upon the most coarse and scanty fare; I had spent my last dime, and saw no fate before me but death by starvation!"

"My poor girl, if you had come to such a pass, the workhouse would have received you!"

"I would have died rather than entered it!" cried Nerissa, with a shudder.

"In that case it is lucky that you met with Doctor Treherne. He subscribes liberally to our funds, and since he came into a fortune he has devoted a goodly portion to purposes of charity. Ah! there is a ring at the outer door, and no doubt it is he."

The matron's surmise was correct, for almost immediately the expected visitor was ushered into the room.

He was a tall, dark-complexioned man of about eight-and-twenty, with an intellectual rather than strictly handsome face, illumined by black-fringed eyes of grayish blue. There was something peculiarly winning in the sweet, grave smile which often irradiated his features, and his voice was mellow and pleasing.

Miss Wilton received him with the respect due to a gentleman who gave his bank-notes freely, and his services as medical attendant to the institution without fee or reward.

"I perceive, Miss Wilton, that under your care my patient is rapidly improving," he remarked, taking the offered seat near the two. "I trust"—this was to Nerissa—"that you now excuse me for insisting as I did on your removal from the small, unhealthy room where you lodged?"

"I can only thank you for bringing me here," she answered, with a flickering smile; "and look back with a shudder to the miseries of Blank street."

"You must never live in such a place again; the houses are not fit for human habitation."

"Poverty cannot choose its home," she answered with a sigh.

"But we must find means to help you. You are an orphan, you say, without any living relations?"

"I have not a friend in the world."

"And you came to New York to seek employment?" he continued, pursuing his inquiries.

"Ah, New York is a cruel place!" sighed the girl. "I walked all day for weeks in search of work, but people looked at me suspiciously because I was a stranger; and when I told them they must take me without reference as to character, turned away from me with a sneer and shrug of the shoulders."

"But is there no one to speak a word in your favor?"

She shook her head.

"Few are in such an isolated position, unless they have forfeited the esteem of their friends," observed the matron, pursing up her lips.

Alaric Treherne's penetrating but kindly eyes sought Nerissa's countenance. Her color rose beneath his scrutiny, and she found courage to rebut the matron's insinuation.

"Do not misjudge me, madam," she said, firmly but not disrespectfully, "because I cannot explain the reason why you see me thus deserted and friendless. For no fault of mine I have been persecuted by those who should have protected me, and have become a beggar and an outcast. Dear madam, poor and abject though I be, I still can dare say that I am not unworthy the sympathy of a pure-minded woman, nor the assistance of a true-hearted man."

"And that assistance I will give," said Alaric, warmly; "or, what will be better still, my aunt Pennington shall help you. I know I can interest her in your favor. She has a good heart, as you are aware," he continued, turning to Miss Wilton; "and ever since my cousin Muriel offended her by making an imprudent marriage, has led a lonely and secluded life. I have often heard her express a wish for the society of some young girl whom she might love and treat as a daughter. Why should she not take Miss Marsden under her protection? At least, I can make the proposition."

Miss Wilton looked dubious. Her benevolent instincts did not go quite so far as Doctor Treherne's, but then perhaps Nerissa's beauty could not exert so great an influence over her feminine heart.

When Alaric left the "Home," he determined upon rescuing Nerissa from the deplorable condition in which he found her. He was rich now, but in early youth had felt the sting of poverty, and that experience softened him toward those who were wallowing in that slough of despond.

He had been brought up to the medical profession, and loved it too well to abandon it when it was no longer necessary as a means of gain; but he practiced most among the poor, refusing payment for his services, and leaving wealthy patients who could afford high fees to his more impecunious professional brethren.

It was while attending a consumptive mason who occupied a room in the house where Nerissa dwelt, that he was summoned to the miserable garret where the young girl lay swooning from weakness and inanition.

Perceiving the cause of her illness, she was, at his request, admitted to the institution over which Miss Wilton presided.

Nerissa had fled from Ravenhurst in a paroxysm of terror caused by her guardian's fury when, on the next occasion of his pressing his suit, she told him she was married, and to go and satisfy himself of the fact at the office of the Justice in Bridgeport.

So great was his rage that she fancied her life was in peril, so took flight from the house with no other property in her possession than such articles of clothing as were crammed into her small black valise; enough money to

take her to New York, and her father's gold watch, which she had now disposed of in order to provide food and lodging.

As Nerissa fell asleep that night in the long, whitewashed dormitory where so many companions in misfortune found temporary refuge, her last waking thoughts were of Alaric Treherne. She knew that he trusted her, and although he was a comparative stranger, the knowledge somehow compensated for all she had undergone of late.

Suddenly she awoke from a fearful dream, wherein Matthew Gunthorpe and Everard Vaughan were dragging her to the mouth of a furnace, whence leaped fiery tongues of flame ready to devour her, while in the distance the young doctor stretched out his hand to aid; but, despite her struggles she was unable to reach him.

The smoke from the furnace seemed still in her mouth and nostrils, as she sat upright in her narrow bed, palpitating with fear. Though fully awake the suffocating sensation rather increased than diminished, and she realized that her dream was but a reflection of the truth, and the house was on fire.

With trembling hands, which alarm rendered almost powerless, she hastened to put on her clothes. She could hear the hoarse murmurs of a gathering crowd outside, while the inmates of the dormitories, roused from sleep, shrieked wildly for help, and increased the general confusion. Doors were thrown open, admitting fresh volumes of smoke and the dense heat caused by advancing flames. Terrified women climbed upon window-ledges, and prepared to cast themselves headlong to the ground, being only restrained from doing so by the excited cries of the crowd, who urged them to wait for the fire-escape. The heat became unendurable. Nerissa, panting for breath, attempted to reach the window, but a dozen rough hands were ready to thrust her aside, for the atmosphere was suffocating, and the women fought for life.

At such a moment, forbearance and courtesy had no place. The strong triumphed over the weak.

One woman, however, whose coarse features and loud, harsh voice had repelled Nerissa during her short sojourn at the Home, showed that a warm heart and unselfish nature lay hidden beneath an unprepossessing exterior. Taking the girl's arm she forced her forward until her sufferings were relieved by a breath of the cool night air, while with almost motherly tenderness she bade her take courage.

"Poor child! You are sore afraid; but be brave and have patience; we may still be saved."

The flames were rising higher, and spread with rapidity. Nerissa gave herself up for lost. But now were heard the tramp of horses mingled with the yells of the crowd.

The fire-engines were coming, and the ruddy glow of that dreadful blaze shone on the helmets of those brave men, who soon were seen darting hither and thither, intent upon the execution of their duty.

The water played upon the burning building, the escape was raised, and from the lower floors many were rescued, while Nerissa and her companions awaited in an agony of impatience the moment when their turn might arrive.

Suddenly arose a shout of consternation. The escape is injured by the flames, and will act no longer.

Can the power of man save those who still entreat for aid before they are engulfed by advancing waves of fire?

At this juncture Nerissa's despairing eyes fall on a tall figure of a man pushing his way amid the crowd with the determination of approaching close to the house, and a thrill of hope strangely disproportioned to its cause goes through her heart as she recognizes Alaric Treherne. Policemen bar his passage with vain remonstrances as to possible dangers; he thrusts them aside, and stands beneath the window where Nerissa's ghastly face lights up at his approach with a gleam resembling joy.

Already she has learned to trust him. Involuntarily he stretches his arms toward her. She mistakes the gesture for a sign that thus he can save her, and disregarding his warning cry, springs lightly upon the window-ledge, and takes the perilous leap which will bear her to death or safety.

By a superhuman effort he succeeds in catching her; but his shoulder is dislocated and he suffers acute pain. He scarcely feels it, however, as he gazes on the sweet unconscious face, and knows that she has escaped all serious injury.

He refuses to go in search of surgical aid until Nerissa is taken into one of the neighboring houses, where, carefully tended, she soon recovers her senses.

By this time the other inmates of the Home have been rescued in various ways by the firemen and eager crowd, the roof has fallen in with a great crash, and the building itself bids fair to become only a heap of smoking ruins.

CHAPTER V.

THE RETURNED PRODIGAL.

"I AM glad, aunt, that you are so pleased with Miss Marsden. I always said that you required a cheerful young companion to keep up your spirits, and now you see I was right."

"You generally are, my dear Alaric," and the speaker gazed affectionately at her young relative, as they sat together in the luxuriously-furnished room she called her boudoir, enjoying a confidential chat.

Mrs. Pennington was tall and thin, with an appearance of delicate health, both in her pale complexion and the deep lines around her mouth and temples. She was simply dressed in some clinging black fabric, without trimming or ornament, relieved by plain linen collar and cuffs; while her dark hair, thickly streaked with gray, was plainly braided under a cap which owed little to the milliner's art. She was a rich woman and spent money lavishly on art or charity, but on her own adornment she practiced the strictest economy.

"Miss Marsden seems happy here, I suppose?" said Alaric, interrogatively, after a slight pause. "She has recovered the shock caused by the fire?"

"She is well in health, but sometimes rather pensive. It is mysterious, Alaric, that so charming a girl should be without a single friend, and I cannot induce her to speak of the past."

"All in good time, my dear aunt," said the young man, soothingly. "When you have been longer acquainted, she will be anxious to confide her secrets to you."

"Do you think her pretty?"

"More than pretty—beautiful!" was the emphatic answer.

"Yet she is not like Muriel."

"Not in the least."

Muriel was Mrs. Pennington's daughter, and six years ago, when a girl of eighteen, the betrothed of Alaric Treherne.

"I wish, Alaric, that I had the power to forget things as easily as you seem to do," said the lady, with some asperity. "You talk as calmly of my child as if you had not been playmates together, friends and lovers until that ever-to-be-regretted day when she announced her intended marriage with George St. Aubyn."

"You do not blame me, I suppose, for renouncing all allegiance to another man's wife?" remarked Alaric, quietly. "When Muriel changed her mind, and gave me to understand that I was no longer an acceptable suitor, would you have me pine away because she was fickle?"

"You never really loved her!" exclaimed Mrs. Pennington, unaware, however, that in her words a germ of truth lay hidden.

"My dear aunt, why need we recall the past, with its mortifications and disappointments? If Muriel had married me, I would have tried to make her happy; but she preferred the handsome and fascinating George

St. Aubyn to the plodding doctor. I think all the ladies were charmed with him, Muriel among the rest, on the evening we saw him first at the dramatic entertainment given at the armory. He was rather a stick, in theatrical parlance; but then, as they said, he was so good-looking."

"I fear he was a worthless scamp!" sighed Mrs. Pennington; "yet, Alaric, I sometimes find myself wishing that I had borne his insolence, and not allowed him to find a pretext for estranging my daughter from me. Had we not quarreled, he must have permitted her to write or visit me occasionally; now I know not what has become of her."

"Muriel should never have forgotten her mother's claims!" said he sternly. "Even duty to her husband cannot excuse neglect of that sacred tie."

"My dear boy, you are so severe!" remarked Mrs. Pennington, deprecating his indignation.

Nerissa's entrance was a seasonable interruption to a subject which usually gave rise to a decided difference of opinion between aunt and nephew. The roses of health were again revisiting the girl's cheek, and her form showed the roundness of youth in its graceful curves. In a dress of blue serge, with a cluster of scarlet geraniums fastening the creamy lace which encircled her swan-like throat, she brightened the room like a gleam of sunshine, and Mrs. Pennington cast aside her despondency, and welcomed her with a smile.

"Well, my dear, you seem the better for your morning stroll. You look quite blooming."

"I mean to get rid of my pale cheeks now, and become bright and rosy," returned the girl, playfully, "since I have met with kind friends and a happy home."

"Then it is a happy home to you, Nerissa?"

"How can you doubt it?"

And she seated herself on a low stool at the feet of her benefactress, and stroked her thin, white hand.

"I cannot remember my mother—she died while I was an infant. Had she lived, I can scarcely believe she could have been more kind and tender than you have been to me."

"You do me good, too, Nerissa. I was often dull and moping until you came to cheer me."

"It is pleasant to hear you say that I have done you good," cried Nerissa, joyfully. "But I must not forget," she added, "that I owe all this happiness to Doctor Treherne. Had it not been for his kindly interest I should long ago have perished in that miserable room where he first found me."

"Do not let your mind dwell upon sorrows which are best forgotten," he said. "You have now a fond protectress in my aunt, who views you as a daughter, while you may regard me as a—"

He was about to say a brother, but it struck him suddenly with a feeling of surprise that he was glad Nerissa was not his sister. So he substituted the word "friend," and the momentary embarrassment caused a shade of red to appear upon his generally colorless and dark-complexioned face.

A servant entered at this juncture and announced, "Mrs. St. Aubyn."

The mother started wildly from her chair with a cry of delight, and in an instant had clasped her arms around a tall, slender lady, dressed in deep mourning, who had advanced with the uncertain air of one not quite sure of her reception.

"Muriel, Muriel, my child, why have you treated me so cruelly? I have been hungering for the sight of your sweet face, the touch of your soft hand!"

"It was not my fault, mother."

Muriel St. Aubyn gently disengaged herself from that clinging embrace, and offered her hand to Doctor Treherne.

"We are friends, cousin Alaric, are we not?" she asked, with a winning smile; "though I own that I treated you very shabbily."

"That is forgiven and forgotten years ago, Muriel."

"How noble of you to say so! Then you are glad to see me again? And this lady?" she added, turning to Nerissa, who stood near, confused. "Will you introduce us?"

"This is Miss Nerissa Marsden, who lives with my aunt as companion."

"Indeed!" she interrupted, without waiting for the introduction to be completed. "But I have come home now to be always with mamma—that is, if she will forgive my apparent neglect and receive me again."

She cast an appealing glance from eyes of a deep sapphire blue at her mother as she spoke.

"My child, you are welcome as a bird to its nest! But what will your husband say?"

"Do not let us speak of him during these joyful moments of our first reunion. He is dead. These mourning robes are worn for him. Yes, dearest mother, you have back with you a widowed child, who has regretted often that she did not allow herself to be guided by your good advice. Ah, Alaric!"—once more her sparkling orbs lifted to his face—"a woman who forsakes her first love is never really happy."

Nerissa stole from the room. Surely she was not wanted during the progress of such confidential communications?

"I am glad she has the sense to withdraw," was Muriel's comment. "We can now feel more at ease. Mother, how could you let this stranger take my place?" She spoke reproachfully.

"It was a place you voluntarily resigned," observed Doctor Treherne. "But my aunt took charge of Miss Marsden at my request. She was a stranger in the city, poor and unprotected. I attended her professionally, and was glad to secure for her so unexceptionable a situation."

"I suppose young doctors always take an interest in their pretty patients," remarked Mrs. St. Aubyn, with an assumed simplicity which concealed a covert sneer. "But, dearest mother, I had great difficulty in finding you out. I could not believe that the rich lady, Mrs. Pennington, of Madison square, was the same who used to economize so painfully in the dingy house at Harlem. I suppose that, contrary to all expectation, that seemingly interminable lawsuit is at last concluded?"

Was she telling the truth in pretending that her desire for a reconciliation preceded her knowledge of the change in her mother's circumstances?

Alaric had his suspicions, but Mrs. Pennington embraced her daughter all the more fondly for believing that she would have been sought out in her poverty as eagerly as in her wealth.

There was something so winning in Muriel's manner that a harsher critic than her mother might have been led to forget the delinquencies which in the past gradually raised a barrier between them.

The clandestine meetings with George St. Aubyn when she had been engaged to her cousin Alaric, the obstinate resolution to marry the former, notwithstanding all warnings and entreaties, with subsequent unkindness and neglect, were allowed to sink into oblivion under the influence of that captivating smile and caressing touch.

"I must send for my baggage, and make myself at home again," she said, with Mrs. Pennington's hand clasped in her own. "And, mamma, you must let me have the very next room to yours, as I used to when I was a child, will you not?"

"Certainly, my love—that is, you shall have it soon, but at present it is appropriated to Nerissa Marsden."

A shade passed over her fair face.

"I shall be jealous of your *rotegee*, Cousin Alaric."

"Such jealousy is unworthy of a noble nature," he replied, gravely. "You should not malign yourself, Muriel, even in jest."

"Alaric will lecture you again, my dear, as in the old days," said the mother, fondly smiling;

ing; "but you will not mind granting him the privilege."

Already it seemed as if the last six years were a dream, and Muriel had never left her. Then the thought flashed through her mind that, after all, her dearest hope might have been only deferred instead of abandoned, and the two she loved best—her daughter and nephew—might at length unite their destinies, and be happy together.

Perhaps Alaric's reproof had a good effect upon his cousin; for when she met Nerissa again she greeted her with a friendly warmth which effaced from the girl's mind the unpleasant impression made by their first introduction.

It was evident, however, that Mrs. St. Aubyn had learned from her mother how little the latter knew of the antecedents of her young companion; for Nerissa soon found extreme difficulty in parrying her apparent by guileless questions. When it was impossible, to frame answers without danger of betraying her secret, she took refuge in silence.

Muriel did not appear to notice her embarrassment, but chatted on with a confidential air.

"I am determined that you and I shall be great friends," she said; and Alaric, who stood near, heard that remark, and smiled kindly upon her.

They all dined together, and the evening passed pleasantly away.

Muriel was sentimental and gay by turns.

She sang splendidly, in a fine contralto voice, which contrasted strangely with the sweet, untrained notes of Nerissa.

It was late before Alaric departed, and the ladies retired to their own rooms.

It was a wild night. The wind in heavy gusts shook the windows and whistled down the wide chimney.

Perhaps the noise it made caused Nerissa to be wakeful, for she lay thinking over the events of the day, and wondering whether this unexpected return of the daughter of her kind friend would cause her expulsion from the home which she dearly prized. She should not sink again into the condition whence she had been rescued; her confidence both in Mrs. Pennington and Dr. Treherne forbade the supposition, but she had become attached to her friends and their surroundings, so the idea of being sent among strangers was unwelcome.

A heavier gust of wind than usual prevented her from hearing the slight noise made by the opening door, but happening to turn upon her pillow, she saw, with some alarm, the tall, slender figure of a woman, bearing a shaded lamp, moving at the further end of her chamber.

Swiftly but silently it made its way toward a side-table, where Nerissa's workbox, writing-case, and a few favorite books were neatly placed in order, and the gazer recognized, with surprise, Muriel St. Aubyn.

She wore a long, loose dressing gown of red cashmere, and her dark hair, released from its fastenings, fell, in uncurled masses, over her shoulders.

As she turned her pale, eager face toward the bed, perhaps to make sure that her entrance had not aroused the sleeper, Nerissa uttered her name.

She started, but in a moment her light laugh echoed through the room.

"Miss Marsden, you look quite frightened. I am afraid I have alarmed you. The truth is that I could not sleep owing to the excitement of to-day, and I remembered hearing you say that you often rose early to read or study, so thought you might have some book with which I could while away the wearisome night-hours. Is there one here that you can recommend?"

She scarcely waited for an answer, but taking up the volume which lay nearest, bade Nerissa good-night, and left the room.

"I must be more careful in my next attempt," she murmured, as she passed along the corridor; "but I will never rest until I have discovered this girl's history. Her keys were

on the table, and her desk—a gift of my mother's most likely—was close at hand. There may be in it letters or papers which will give the clew I want to find. If I discover any secret which does not redound to her credit, I will not hesitate to make use of it. It is in vain she lays her snares for Alaric Treherne!"

When Nerissa arose the following morning, almost the first object that caught her eye was a white card lying on the carpet where Muriel stood only a few hours previously. Thinking it must have fallen from her drawer or work-box, she picked it up, and was surprised to find that it was the photograph of a young man in a kind of fancy dress. A second glance, and her heart beat fast, for a closed page in her past life seemed reopened.

It was the likeness of Everard Vaughan. Yes, there could be no mistake; the face and figure both were his, though he did not wear the depressed and melancholy expression which, during their brief acquaintance, had been stamped upon his lineaments. He stood smiling, a goblet uplifted in his hand, his lips parted, as if giving vent to some mirthful sally, or song in praise of rosy wine. Yet it was Everard—her husband.

At the remembrance of that hurried scene in the magistrate's office, a faintness as of death stole over her. Then, panting for freedom from Matthew Gunthorpe's addresses, she had joyfully raised an irrevocable obstacle to the furtherance of that gentleman's plans; now she began to realize the extent of her folly. Married in a false name, was she legally bound for life to one man, when it was possible that she might one day fall in love with another?

Nerissa was not lawyer enough to decide the question. These were her first thoughts as she stood gazing on the photograph; then she began to consider how it came into her room. Certainly it had never been in her possession before; and with a thrill of dread she began to imagine that Mrs. St. Aubyn knew her secret, and adopted that measure for making her aware of the fact. Suspense was terrible; she must learn the worst without delay.

Hastily finishing her toilet, she descended to the breakfast room.

Muriel was standing near the window, very fair and graceful in her long black robe, but her face flushed a deep, dull crimson as Nerissa offered her the photograph.

"You must have dropped this in my room last night Mrs. St. Aubyn."

It seemed at first as if she were about to deny it, but after an instant's pause she said, in a careless tone: "Oh, yes; it is mine. I was looking over the photographs of some actors and actresses as I was unpacking last night. I am so fond of the stage, Miss Marsden, and this must have caught in my dress. I forget who it represents, or why I bought it, but he has rather a nice face, has he not?"

She slipped the photograph into her pocket, and began to talk upon another topic in a manner which set Nerissa's heart at ease.

CHAPTER VI.

A RECOGNITION.

WINTER had set in with severity—"fine, seasonable weather," so the skaters said when sallying forth to enjoy their favorite pastime; so the schoolboys thought while pelting each other with snowballs, regardless of the fact that the cold which braces a young, healthy constitution, to those less richly endowed by nature brings suffering, disease and death.

Thus it proved with Matthew Gunthorpe. A severe cold caught during long exposure to a snow-storm resulted in a serious illness; bad symptoms appeared, and it became evident that life for him would soon be over.

Sophia was an indefatigable nurse. She loved her brother all the more because their characters were similar; and what would have repelled others only brought them closer together.

She sat by him now in the gray twilight, watching every change in his countenance, and striving to hope, although the doctors told her all hope was vain.

Matthew tossed uneasily on his pillow, muttering a few disjointed words, whose sense escaped her.

"What troubles you, my dear brother?" she asked, soothingly.

"My mind is weighed down by a heavy burden," he answered, feebly. "It is only when a man is stretched upon a sick bed from which he may never rise again that conscience persists in making itself heard. I have long turned a deaf ear to its whispers, but it speaks loudly to-night."

"But, Matthew, you talk as if you had committed some great crime!"

"I have wronged the orphan child of my dead friend; I have driven a thoughtless, inexperienced girl into making a rash marriage, which she may long ago have bitterly repented. Where is Nerissa Marsden, whom her father committed to my care? Is she alive or dead?—prosperous or penniless? Sophia, unless these questions are answered how can I die in peace?"

His weak voice rose in sudden passion. Sophia attempted to calm him.

"Dear brother, do not make yourself uneasy. No doubt she is with her husband—the husband whom she preferred to you. Remember her deceit, ingratitude, and obstinacy, and you will no longer condemn your own shortcomings."

He knew the casuistry of such reasoning, and groaned aloud in perturbation of spirit.

"Oh, Sophia! would that I could be blind to the unwelcome truth! It was our ill-treatment that drove her to desperation. And yet I loved her—loved her even when I was most cruel."

"She should have felt honored by the offer of your hand."

"I thought so then, but not now. What was I, a man in the sere and autumn of life, to expect that bright young being to link her fate to mine? Beauty and youth were her attractions, which rekindled in my heart a fire that had long sunk into ashes. What had I to offer in exchange?"

"You could have given her a good home, and—and—"

Miss Sophia paused, for she suddenly recollected that Nerissa was no portionless damsel, and Matthew had wanted not only a wife but a fortune.

"There is one reparation I can make for all she has suffered through my foolish scheme," he continued. "Things have prospered with me strangely lately. I seem to have had the gift of Midas, for all I have touched has turned into gold. The small sum of money belonging to Nerissa which I managed to get into my possession formed the nucleus of a large fortune. I will provide for you handsomely, Sophia—it is your due, for you are my only sister; but Ravenhurst and the largest share of the recently-acquired property will go to Nerissa."

Miss Sophia was startled. At first her feelings were outraged by the notion that her claims were ignored for the sake of "that rebellious, obstinate chit," who had given so much trouble.

But Ravenhurst was a rambling, gloomy mansion, and she was fast becoming old.

A home less pretentious might be made more comfortable, and a moderate income would amply supply her wants.

"Let it be as you wish, if it makes you happier," she said, calmly. "Nerissa will be in luck, for I suppose she comes to her own fortune as well?"

"Yes; the girl was right when she claimed it on her marriage, for by her father's will her choice was left absolutely free and unfettered. If her husband had shown himself a man, and asked it at my hands, I must have yielded it up or faced the consequences. He must be a pitiful, sneaking cur to keep in the background, and not come forward boldly to claim his wife. Sophia, there is some mystery about this William Lee. I could find no trace of him beyond the signature in the register."

"It cannot matter now," remarked Sophia,

who had often vainly pondered on the subject.

"You are right. She is a wife—that is all-sufficient for legal purposes."

"Her father made a great mistake—" began Sophia, when her brother's gesture stopped her in the middle of a sentence.

"Sister, my business is to repair my own faults, not to condemn others. I shall put the matter into the hands of my lawyers, Quill & Steele, at Bridgeport. They will see Nerissa righted when I am gone."

Matthew Gunthorpe passed away that night, but not before he made his atonement.

His will, properly signed and attested, was in the lawyer's possession, who promised to use his utmost endeavors to carry out the wishes of his respected client.

He also managed to scrawl a few farewell words to Nerissa, asking her forgiveness.

If the excitement and exertion consequent on these efforts accelerated the end, at least they rendered it more peaceful.

Christmas was over, that season of good cheer, holly-berries and general festivity. In Madison square it was spent quietly, yet with all due observance, and when the New Year came, and was welcomed, as Dickens has written, "like an infant heir to the whole world," the three young persons who were assembled under Mrs. Pennington's roof to hear the bells ring in its advent, had no premonition it would bring so many changes with it.

"Aunt Pennington," said Alaric, as they sat round the fire, a sociable family circle, "I am going to ask of you a favor."

"What is it, my dear boy?"

"I have taken a box for to-morrow at Niblo's, to see the pantomime everybody is talking of as a triumph of scenic art. It is dull work to sit in solitary state, so I trust that you, together with cousin Muriel and Nerissa, will oblige me with your company."

"I do not care much for the theater," said Mrs. Pennington, smiling; "yet I cannot reject your offer."

"That is fortunate! And you, young ladies?"

He turned toward the girls, who were sitting side by side, each so beautiful, yet so unlike.

"We shall be charmed!" exclaimed Mrs. St. Aubyn, for herself and companion.

"But, my dear child, in your deep mourning!"

"Now, mother, do not throw obstacles in the way of my enjoyment. Why should I not have a share in the gayeties of the season? I can sit well back in a private box, so that no one need be scandalized by my presence."

Alaric would have liked some sign from Nerissa showing that the proposed arrangement was agreeable, but she was looking in an opposite direction, and appeared to think that her companion had answered for both.

He thought, with regret, how seldom she spoke to him, unless directly addressed. Indeed, sometimes it appeared that, far from taking pleasure in his society, she rather avoided him than otherwise.

Yet she had gradually become very dear to him, a thousand times more dear than Muriel had ever been, even in the days when, from being constantly thrown together, he believed he loved her and she could make him happy.

Now the illusion was over, and not likely to be renewed. Muriel might look her loveliest, and smile her sweetest; she might even sigh pathetically while referring to their early love, and the blight which fell upon it. He could not forget that, when bound to him by the most sacred promises, she listened to George St. Aubyn's wooing, and jilted him for the sake of a man who, judging by the slight reverence she paid his memory, could never have been really loved?

When Nerissa descended the next evening to the drawing-room, dressed for the theater, she looked charming in Alaric's eyes. No occasion hitherto had arisen for any extra display of the toilet in Mrs. Pennington's quiet family

circle, therefore the flowers nestling in the girl's hair, the pretty though inexpensive ornaments which brightened her dark silk dress, the slender throat and rounded arms, not quite so closely veiled as usual, struck him with admiration.

He scarcely glanced at his cousin, who noticed his indifference, and frowned until her straight brows almost met.

Nor was this her only mortification. Mrs. Pennington was a woman of the old school, and as such a great stickler for propriety; so, through her mother's prejudices, the young lady found herself compelled to sit at the back of the box, while Nerissa was placed in front, where many wandering eyes were attracted by her fair face.

Alaric often leaned forward to speak to her, or listen to her criticisms upon the performance; therefore, although Muriel was his next neighbor, and as such should have been satisfied, she was unable to command his undivided attention.

The pantomime, like most others, was a succession of scenes more or less gay and glittering. There was the usual display of spangles, twinkling feet, hideous masks, and the army of supernumeraries that throng the stage on every available opportunity.

Nerissa never knew when first she began to fancy that the figure and movements of one of these men were familiar, but she caught herself watching for his appearance either as a daemon in the Palace of Discord, a soldier in the most impossible of regiments, or a courtier to the most wonderful of kings.

Whenever he entered, in spite of grotesque masks and outrageous dresses, her thoughts flew back to her old home at Ravenhurst and Everard Vaughan.

By degrees it seemed that this man, whoever he might be, watched her too. She could not see his eyes, but the face was always turned toward her.

At length, whether by accident or design, his mask slipped aside for an instant. She was right. Everard was before her, and recognized her.

She experienced a strange conflict of feeling. She had befriended the unfortunate young man when he was in a grievous strait, and earned, so he had assured her often, his lifelong gratitude.

Her interest in him was still so great, that she would have rejoiced to hear of his welfare in some distant land, whither he intended to depart when they last met. But seeing him now brought forcibly to mind her anomalous position. She pictured Mrs. Pennington's consternation, Alaric Treherne's amazement, if they ever learned that she and Everard Vaughan had called one another by the sacred names of husband and wife.

She was thankful when the harlequin's wand had wrought its last transformation, and the clown executed his final somersault, when the dark curtain was drawn down over the lime-lighted scene, and she was able to shrink into the darkest corner of the carriage which conveyed them home, and brood over memories of the past.

CHAPTER VII.

HER UNTOLD SECRET.

EVERY New Yorker knows and loves Central Park in summer, when the brightly-tinted foliage softens the too glaring sunshine, and the smooth greensward seems like a velvet carpet to tired feet weary of the hard pavement and dusty roads.

But on a bright winter day, when the leafless trees are clothed in a mantle of snow, and the robins chirp their loudest on the boughs or hop sedately across the quiet paths, it is not without attraction.

So at least thought Alaric Treherne, as, with skates in hand, he walked briskly away from the ornamental water (where he had been enjoying an hour's healthful exercise) in the direction of one of the park entrances.

There had lately been a decided change in

Alaric's mode of life. He had relinquished his practice to a rising young medical man with whom for years he had been on intimate terms, and he removed from his apartments in the neighborhood of the "Home" where Nerissa once found shelter, and took rooms near his aunt's residence, so that, without inconvenience, he could be a frequent visitor.

He still spent a goodly portion of his income on philanthropic works, but was scarcely so lavish in expenditure as formerly, remembering that the time might come when his expenses would increase, while his leisure was much absorbed by a thousand trifling duties which devolve upon those who find their chief delight in ladies' society.

In truth, Alaric was deeply in love, and things which once most interested him now seemed dull and vapid, for his whole heart was set upon winning Nerissa for his wife.

At an abrupt turn in the path he saw her walking at a short distance before him.

It was a golden opportunity for putting his fate to the test. He accepted the good omen, and, quickening his pace, a few moments brought him to her side.

He noticed the vivid blush with which she greeted him, and how her small hand fluttered in his broad palm. Although he was no coxcomb, he could not help fancying that such maidenly embarrassment augured well for his suit.

After awhile, as they walked slowly side by side under the spreading branches, he managed to stammer forth a few incoherent words declaratory of his love.

Nerissa, her eyes swimming in tears, laid her hand upon his arm, and murmured:

"Pray, Doctor Treherne, say no more. I cannot—indeed I cannot be your wife!"

"Do not decide too hastily," he urged, deeply wounded. "You may not have thought of me except as a friend; but now since you know how fondly I love you, you may learn in time to reciprocate my affection. I will be very patient, and not press for an answer until you are ready to give it, only do not quite reject me."

"To do so is the truest kindness," she faltered.

"Do you then so utterly hate me that under no circumstances you would consent to become my wife?"

"Oh, Doctor Treherne, you must know that I do not hate you!"

"Indeed! Of course I have no right to ask the question I am going to put to you, but my life's happiness is at stake! Nerissa, do you love another?"

"No," she said, glad to be able to give him even this poor consolation; "I have never loved."

"Then, dearest, I cannot relinquish the hope of winning you! I am content to bide my time, strong in the belief that devotion and constancy will bring their reward, and the girl I love will be my own dear wife!"

"That can never be!" she answered.

"But why, Nerissa?"

His persistency distressed her. Tears, which would be restrained no longer, coursed down her cheeks.

"How selfish I am, my darling, to vex you with my importunity! I will accept my disappointment manfully if we may still be friends. You do not dismiss me so entirely that I may not dare to approach you, Nerissa?"

She faintly smiled through her tears.

"If you will be friendly, it will make me very happy. I have not forgotten all your goodness, and what you suffered to save me from a terrible death! I should have lost my life the night of the fire had not your strong arms been outstretched to save me!"

They walked home in silence.

He left her at the door, for he was in no mood for society, and went his way very sad and downcast.

He did not notice Muriel's form, half-hidden

by the curtain in the dining-room, as she watched him from the window.

Nerissa locked herself up in her own chamber, and indulged in the feminine luxury of a good cry.

This occupation becoming at length monotonous, it occurred to her to ask herself why it was she wept.

Did she love Alaric Treherne? She, a girl of eighteen, inexperienced in the ways of the world, having no one from whom she could seek counsel, yet the wife of Everard Vaughan! During her isolated existence at Ravenhurst she had not dreamed of either love or marriage until Matthew Gunthorpe had suggested the subject to her. Now she recognized the error she had committed in marrying Everard Vaughan.

Notwithstanding Nerissa had put a period to the aspirations of Doctor Treherne, by telling him point-blank that she could not marry him, he did not discontinue his visits to his aunt's. On the contrary, he called more frequently; but he directed the greater part of his conversation to Muriel and his aunt. Muriel did not love her cousin, but her vain, coquettish nature could not endure the pang of seeing herself supplanted in his affections. Once she was dear to him, she knew; and a marriage between them was in every way desirable, so that the newly-acquired fortune might be kept in the family.

One evening she met Alaric in the vestibule, and with a mysterious air invited him to come into the library, where they could speak without fear of interruption. A smile of triumph curled her full red lip.

The night before she had paid another secret visit to Nerissa's chamber, and this time her researches had been rewarded.

The room called the library, although it scarcely merited that ambitious designation, was one of the most cheerful and comfortable in the house. There were cushioned chairs and couches, inviting to luxurious ease rather than study; a long table, upon which lay magazines and writing materials; pictures upon the walls, and rich crimson curtains vailing the long windows.

Muriel seated herself by the brightly glowing fire, and Alaric stood near her, wondering what communication she had to make which demanded so much privacy.

"Dear Alaric," she began, "I am about to take you into my confidence. As my cousin and early friend, it is natural that I should come to you in my little difficulties."

He bowed his head in assent.

"You must promise, however, to preserve an inviolable secrecy regarding what I am about to tell you."

"Of course, Muriel, I shall respect your confidence," he answered, rather stiffly. "Pray do not keep me in suspense any longer."

"Well, then, to begin at once, I am jealous and angry in noticing the influence which this girl who calls herself Nerissa Marsden has acquired over my mother."

"Muriel, why do you speak thus slightly of Miss Marsden? There is no reason why she should not be a favorite with my aunt."

"I fear," returned Muriel, pursing her rosy lips, and striving to look grave, "that she has entered the house under false pretenses. It is dreadful to think of, but she is an impostor, without even a right to the name she bears."

"How do you know this?" he asked, in great agitation.

"My dear cousin, please do not ask me to give you my authority, for honor compels me to keep silence. All I know is, that this girl who pretends to be guileless—"

He interrupted her wildly.

"It is no pretense. I would stake my life upon her innocence and purity!"

"Good gracious, Alaric! You need not exclaim so vehemently, as if I were about to take away the character of a woman who is nothing to you. I was about to remark, if you had let me finish my sentence, that she is married."

"Married?—Nerissa married?" he cried. "Are you aware of what you are saying? What proofs have you for the assertions you make?"

"Have I not said that I cannot give you proofs?"

"It is impossible to live in this state of doubt," said Alaric, pacing the apartment to and fro. "To meet Nerissa every day—to press her hand in friendship—to gaze into her truthful eyes, and keep this secret locked up in my breast, would be worse than death!"

"You are strangely excited, Alaric!"

"Because you seek to destroy my faith in woman by insinuating that treachery and falsehood are hidden in the heart of Nerissa Marsden."

There was a slight rustling noise as one of the heavy curtains was pulled aside, and Nerissa stood before them, her fair head drooping in shame and confusion.

"An eavesdropper!" said Muriel.

"Not so, Mrs. St. Aubyn; I came into this room an hour ago, and, oppressed by troubled thoughts, ensconced myself upon the window-seat where, undisturbed, I might reflect on my past life and future prospects. I must have dropped asleep; but your voices disturbed me, when I discovered that the secret I hitherto deemed it expedient to conceal was a secret no longer."

"Then you are married, Nerissa?" said Alaric, in accents of reproach.

"I am!"

"And your husband still lives?"

"He does, I believe. We have parted, and are not likely to meet again."

"At least, you will tell me his name?"

"His name is William Lee."

"Then why did you deceive us?" said Alaric.

"If your marriage was unhappy, as I fear has been the case, why did you not tell us? Nerissa, you have committed an irreparable wrong."

"I own my fault," she replied humbly. "I never thought that it would bear such bitter fruits. My marriage was a mistake—the madness of folly; oh, that it could be blotted from the record of my life!"

"Of course you will leave my mother's house," remarked Muriel, coldly; "it is no place for an impostor!"

"Be not so harsh and cruel, cousin," pleaded Alaric, deeply moved. "Nerissa," he continued, turning toward her, "if other friends are unwilling to forgive your conduct, remember that you have not forfeited my sympathy or protection."

She thanked him with a look of gratitude. Never had he seemed so dear as now, when she thought of the love that might have made her happy had she been free.

"You will not, then, refuse to give me your advice?" she said meekly, as, advancing to the table, she placed before him a copy of the *Herald*, and laid her finger upon a certain paragraph. "This advertisement must refer to me. I noticed it this morning, and knew it was vain to think of keeping my secret any longer. No doubt Mrs. St. Aubyn saw it, too."

Alaric took the newspaper, and read aloud:

"If Nerissa Lee (*nee* Marsden) will call at the office of Messrs. Quill & Steele, Attorneys at Law, Bridgeport, Conn., she will hear of something greatly to her advantage, under the will of the late Matthew Gunthorpe, Esq."

"He was my guardian," she said, in explanation, "and did not treat me well. I fled from his house to New York, where you came to my succor."

That was all she would tell him about her husband. Nerissa felt bound in honor not to give the slightest clew by which William Lee could be associated with Everard Vaughan, who was still wanted by detectives on a warrant charging him with murder.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNHAPPY DESTINY.

ALARIC TREHERNE lost no time in putting himself into communication with the lawyers

on behalf of Nerissa, and as there was no one to dispute her claim, the business formalities were soon settled. Early in the spring Miss Sophia vacated Ravenhurst, and Nerissa was installed there as mistress.

Familiar as the lawyers were with strange clients and curious family histories, they were puzzled at the reserve of Matthew Gunthorpe's heiress, who was neither wife nor widow, and would tell them nothing regarding her past life.

But it was no business of theirs, this marriage with a sort of phantom bridegroom, who seemed to have departed without leaving a trace behind. They must act according to their instructions; and as General Lascelles, the co-trustee, had died in the West a few weeks before Mr. Gunthorpe, there was really nobody who had any right to pry into her affairs. Society, however, looked very coldly upon Mrs. Lee when she came back to Ravenhurst.

Nerissa, who had been accustomed from her childhood to lead a secluded life, did not perceive the coolness of her neighbors, or have any idea of the scandal which was circulated at her expense.

Mrs. Pennington had been persuaded to take up her abode for a time at Ravenhurst. Muriel accompanied her, for she was inquisitive in regard to everything that concerned Nerissa.

A great deal had to be done in the way of repairing and adorning the grim old mansion. Workmen were employed, and upholsterers consulted. Any one who saw Nerissa busily engaged in the pleasing duties of ordering new furniture, or deciding upon improvements, buying dresses and jewelry for herself and presents for her friends, might have envied her good fortune. In reality, however, she was often restless and miserable. She knew that Alaric suffered. Although he never spoke of love, or behaved in a manner inconsistent with the friendship which could be the only bond between them, she saw the struggle it cost him, and would have given worlds if she could have been free to reward his constancy.

Nerissa had her old liking for solitary rambles; and in the lovely summer weather, when earth and sky wore their most becoming attire, scarcely a day passed that she did not wander for hours through the garden and grounds.

But she no longer skipped blithely along, singing as she went. She had grown grave and thoughtful. Her wayward girlhood had been left behind, and love had matured her into a woman, enduring the trials and anxieties which are the heritage of Eve's daughters.

One day, as she issued from the lodge gates, Dorothy Trent stepped forth to meet her.

"Good-morning, my pretty Miss Nerissa—or Mrs. Lee, as they call you now! It is a long time since I saw you last at my poor cottage. Welcome back to Ravenhurst!"

"Thank you, Dorothy. You must drink my health."

She drew out her purse, and placed a gold-piece in the shriveled palm held out so eagerly to receive it.

"That is a gift worth the having; and now that you are a rich lady, and can do what you like with your money, you will often remember to reward poor old Dorothy for saving your husband's life?"

The old crone chuckled and leered; while Nerissa winced in finding from the woman's manner that the old hag was conscious she held some sort of power over her.

"You need not frown, my lady," continued Dorothy. "I was not so deaf but that I heard you plan that journey to Bridgeport; but I am not going to chatter, so you need not be afraid. I have been waiting here more than an hour for the chance of seeing you. I dare not come to the house, lest servants might talk."

"What did you want with me, Dorothy?"

"Me! I wanted nothing. It was *him* who sent me."

"Whom do you mean?"

"You know the one I mean. He came only yesterday night. I was standing at my cottage door, watching the moon rise over the hill yonder, when I saw the figure of a man coming through the darkness. I thought it must be a tramp or beggar, he seemed so footsore and weary; but as he got nearer I knew my old lodger. He asked if I would take him in again, and I said yes, for of course you will not let me be a loser. So he is now at my place; and you are to go there without loss of time. He wants to see you most partickler."

"Was that the message?" inquired Nerissa, while her pride rose at the imperious summons.

Dorothy nodded knowingly; and without waiting for further converse, hobbled away in the direction of home.

Nerissa stood reflecting for a moment, then followed the woman slowly.

Through the well-remembered wood she went where she and Everard talked together, he all gratitude and submission, she moved by womanly compassion.

Were their positions now to be reversed, and the suppliant to be changed into her master? Very dimly this notion dawned in Nerissa's mind, only to be dismissed with scorn.

At last she reached the lonely but, which looked more miserable and dilapidated than when she saw it last. Two or three panes in the casement windows were broken.

As she loitered, with a strange foreboding that some fresh cloud was about to darken her destiny, Everard appeared on the threshold.

How gaunt and ill he looked! There were dark circles round his eyes, his cheeks were hollow; his shabby clothes hung about his emaciated form, many sizes too large.

But she was most impressed by a subtle change in his countenance—a smoldering fire in his large dark orbs she had not hitherto noticed.

"So you have come, Nerissa. That is well," he said, leading the way into the little sitting-room.

"Why are you here?" she asked, as she sunk upon the rough settle. "It was agreed between us that you should leave America, with the funds I provided you, more than a year ago."

"So I did. I kept my promise to the letter, and started for England two days after we parted. But I could not remain there. A hand seemed to beckon me toward the country where my happiest days had been passed. It was the hand of destiny. I could not resist its influence; so here I am once more on Yankee soil."

"You have not prospered since last we met," she began, timidly, remembering she was now rich, and could afford to give him substantial pecuniary assistance.

He interrupted her roughly.

"Prospered! How could I, when I was always forced to be cautious, and could never stay long in the same place or under the same name? For *her* sake, I am a hunted man, and have enemies ready to gloat over my ruin if I am not very careful and cunning. You are wealthy, Nerissa—at least, I guessed as much from the advertisement which appeared in the *Herald* soon after I saw you at Niblo's—and that wealth you must share with me."

She began to tremble. He was altogether different from his former self—a man who could inspire her with fear.

"I will give you a handsome sum," she said, in a conciliatory tone, "though it was arranged that neither of us had any future claim upon each other. Everard Vaughan, you know not how bitterly I repent that mockery of a marriage. If it could be annulled, I would give half my fortune!"

With clasped hands, she looked pleadingly in his face.

He gave a smile of derision.

"Such links are not easily broken," he answered.

"I know—I know; yet ours could scarcely

have been a legal marriage, since the name you gave was not your own. Oh, Everard, set me free, and I will bless you!"

He laughed outright.

"So it has come to this—and so soon! Yes; those tears and blushes tell their own story! You are in love, madam! It is well for you I am not jealous!"

"You have not yet given me an answer."

"Because your appeal is too exacting. Am I to thrust myself into the felon's dock to suit your convenience? You married me for your own pleasure, and my safety requires that I do not intrude myself upon public notice."

"Yet surely it could be managed? I am prepared to give whatever you demand if you assist me in regaining my liberty."

"No, no!" he answered, roughly. "My plan is something very different. You are my wife. You shall come with me to some country far away, where you will teach me to forget the past and be happy. You are very beautiful, Nerissa. Come, my wife; let me kiss you. That pure kiss will chase away those memories that are driving me mad."

He tried to seize her in his arms.

The glare of insanity was in his eyes.

The overwrought brain, which had struggled so long against adverse fate, was giving way at last.

With a cry of terror, Nerissa broke away from him and hurried from the cottage.

And now the punishment of Nerissa's folly became a burden almost too heavy for endurance.

Day after day she was haunted by the witch-like face of Dorothy Trent, who appeared at untimely hours and unseemly places, either with imperative messages from her lodger or appeals on her own account for money, which appeals often degenerated into threats of exposure.

Dorothy was no simpleton, and more than suspected that there were strong reasons why Everard should so long remained hidden, as it were, in her poor cottage.

Nor was she the visitor Nerissa most dreaded to see.

In the gray twilight, when night begins to cast the veil which affords a friendly shade to those who dare not to venture among their fellow-men in the broad light of day, Everard Vaughan would steal through the gathering gloom toward Ravenhurst. If Nerissa strolled out upon the terrace, or stood under the veranda which sheltered the front of the house, she would hear a voice that would fill her with unutterable fear, or see two gleaming eyes watching every movement.

Once or twice she had spoken with him, offering exorbitant sums if he would only leave her in peace, but the arguments and entreaties were alike wasted upon a madman.

"He was lonely and friendless," he told her; "hunted from place to place by enemies who had sworn to have his life. Her presence would shield him from their persecutions. She saved him once when he was most hardly pressed; could she not be his guardian angel to the end?"

Then, after talking thus pathetically, his mood would change, and she would shrink from the fury expressed in every word and gesture.

Although in great perturbation, she was herself watched by a foe whose vigilance never slumbered.

Muriel soon suspected that some new turn of events had taken place, and hinted her suspicions to Alaric.

"Dear Nerissa seems often melancholy," she said to him one day when they were driving through the lanes in the pretty pony-carriage recently purchased for the ladies' use. "It is strange that now she is rich and independent, able to lavish money at her own caprice, she is more sad and troubled than when she was merely my mother's companion."

"You forget, my dear Muriel, that she is strangely situated. An unhappy marriage overshadows a whole lifetime."

"As I have found," she murmured, with a half-suppressed sigh. "Alaric, you can pity Nerissa. Have you no compassion to bestow on me?"

"The two positions are not analogous. Death has taken your husband, and you are at liberty to form another marriage if it be your pleasure. Nerissa is evidently united to one who is totally unworthy of her. She knows not when he may come to claim her."

"Is it not curious that he should leave his wife in undisturbed possession of so much property? Most men would expect a share."

Alaric twitched the reins rather impatiently. There was no conversation more distasteful to him than speculations regarding Nerissa's husband.

"Do not be angry with me, Alaric," she continued, in the soft, cooing voice she usually adopted in addressing her cousin. "But I cannot help fancying that we may be misled in imagining that the pair are entirely separated. They may meet occasionally, although for some inscrutable reason their interviews are kept profoundly secret. Once or twice in the gloaming I have seen the dark figure of a man lurking about the house near the west wing, where Nerissa's apartments are situated."

"One of the servants' lovers, most likely."

"I scarcely think he would have the boldness to come so near the quarters assigned to the mistress of the house; surely he would loiter in the rear, where his sweetheart would probably be found."

"We cannot tell; besides, we have no right to pry into secrets which are not our business."

"You are always right, dear cousin! Only it is unpleasant to know that a strange man is in the grounds when we least suspect his presence, who may be either a rustic swain, a burglar, or Nerissa's husband!"

And she laughed lightly, as if she were half in jest.

Alaric was silent. He still loved Nerissa, but lately he felt alienated by her want of confidence. Why could she not trust him entirely? Surely she could rely upon his discretion. He might have forgiven the concealment of her marriage in the first instance; but now that it was owned, why preserve such an obstinate silence upon all things connected with the event? He could have borne to see her a happy wife, loving and beloved, while he pursued his course alone, or sometimes tasked in the sunshine of her presence as a sort of brother and counselor, but what he could not endure was to be distrusted.

And then he would wonder whether deceit was a natural component of the female mind, and would be inclined to forgive his cousin Muriel for jilting him so long ago.

The latter was not more vain and frivolous than the rest of her sex. So when the caressing voice again addressed him, he listened to its soft cadence as he was wont to do when Muriel had been doubly bound to him with the tie of cousin and promised wife.

They had spent many happy hours together long before George St. Aubyn came between them, and he loved her; not with the passionate devotion he could have given Nerissa, but with a quiet affection more calculated, perhaps, to promote matrimonial felicity.

Alaric began to wonder if he were wise in so persistently ignoring the fact that a renewal of those half-forgotten feelings was now his best chance of a happy future.

CHAPTER IX.

MURIEL'S TRIUMPH.

It had been raining, all day, and clouds, looking very black and threatening, were still scudding across the sky. Muriel St. Aubyn turned away from the window, and seated herself upon a low stool close at her mother's knee.

"How gloomy everything looks this evening, and it is positively cold!" she remarked, with a shrug of her dainty shoulders.

Mrs. Pennington laid a caressing band upon the smooth, dark braids.

"I am afraid that this place is dull for you, my child, and that Nerissa's low spirits will prove infectious. If it were not that I am anxious she should have companionship, we would return without loss of time to our own comfortable home."

Muriel sighed deeply.

"Dear mother, go where I may, I shall carry with me the cause of my despondency. You know not how hard it is to bear Alaric's continued indifference. I had hoped that at least our old friendship would revive, and in time he might forgive me; but I see that in his eyes no contrition on my part can blot out the memory of his wrongs."

Mrs. Pennington closed the book she had been reading, and her countenance assumed an expression of lively interest.

Like many worthy matrons, she was at heart a match-maker, and it was once her dearest wish to see her child united to Alaric Treberne.

That wish had been thwarted when she thought matters were progressing to perfection, and her disappointment was severe.

Muriel's affections, however, seemed now to be drifting into the right channel, and she could not bring herself to believe that Alaric would remain obdurate.

"My dear, you are too sensitive," she said, tenderly. "I am sure Alaric is your friend, and is too manly to esteem you less because, like many other young girls, you were dazzled by brilliant external qualities, and, indeed, hardly knew your own mind."

"You call him my friend," she returned, in a scornful tone, "and speak of his esteem! Mother, those are cold words, and fall like ice upon my heart. I wish to have his love!"

She lifted her beautiful face, glowing with fervor, and Mrs. Pennington's maternal partiality could not doubt of her success in winning back the heart she had rejected.

"My child, I cannot help feeling that you are not a woman to be easily forgotten, although Alaric's pride may render him reluctant to let you suppose that you are still dear to him."

"I have sometimes fancied that Nerissa is the object of his admiration."

"He admires her no doubt," said Mrs. Pennington thoughtfully. "She was thrown in his way under circumstances which to a man of Alaric's enthusiastic temperament made her doubly interesting. Pity is in some natures dangerously akin to love, and a beautiful girl in deep distress can scarcely be beheld with indifference. I do not conceal from you, Muriel, that once I was reconciled to the probability of love springing up between the two, but then I had no idea that Nerissa was already married."

"That discovery has scarcely removed my rival from my path; for if Alaric prefers her to me, he may not transfer his affections, although it is hopeless for him to think of marrying her."

"My dear child, do not be so despondent. You must have more patience. Besides, it is somewhat premature to think of forming a second union; you are yet in your early widowhood."

"My husband died more than a year ago," she said, coldly. "I have no reason to mourn his loss beyond the usual period."

"Pardon me, my poor girl, for alluding to former troubles. It is strange that both you and Nerissa should have suffered from ill-assorted unions; yet it ought to create a bond of interest between you."

"Do not compare me to her!" cried Muriel, with sudden fury. "I hate her!"

Mrs. Pennington stood agast.

Jealousy, she was aware, had occasioned that sudden outburst on the part of her daughter, and she sympathized with the love which might be unrequited.

"Be calm, my dear, and trust to me," she whispered. "Perhaps I can help you."

An hour later, when Alaric came to make his usual call, he found her alone in the drawing-room.

Nerissa was in her own apartments, and Muriel had a headache, and was lying on the couch in the library. She would join them presently, when she hoped to be better.

"Is Muriel ill, then?" asked Alaric, struck with an indefinable impression that something was amiss more serious than a headache.

Then Mrs. Pennington began to plead her daughter's cause, not quite openly, but in half-veiled hints that Alaric could not fail to comprehend.

She expatiated upon Muriel's altered looks and unequal spirits; reminded him of the proverb, "We return always to one's first love;" gave him to understand that being cured of her youthful frivolity, there was no reason why the once fickle girl should not sober down into an excellent wife.

"I will not affect to misunderstand you, aunt," said Doctor Treherne gravely. "You would have me ask Muriel to renew the engagement which by her own act was broken?"

"I think you would both be happier, my dear boy—indeed I do. I am growing an old woman, and should feel satisfied if I could leave my only child to your protection when my time for departure arrives. Muriel is a creature of impulse. She requires the guidance of a firmer mind than her own. That guidance you are capable of giving her. And she loves you; surely that should cover many imperfections in your eyes."

"Can she really love?" murmured Alaric, thoughtfully. "We deceived ourselves once; and now I hope you are again mistaken."

"You are not very complimentary," replied Mrs. Pennington, with maternal warmth.

"My dear aunt, I hope you believe me when I say that no one estimates Muriel's attractions more highly than I do. She is a charming, accomplished woman, as worthy of admiration and love as she was six years ago when I bowed at her shrine. But the play is played out and the fire is extinguished. Now I could only offer her a divided heart."

"You need say no more; I can guess the rest," said the lady, deeply mortified. "You love Nerissa!"

"And can you wonder? When I met her first the wounds inflicted by Muriel's perfidy were nearly healed, yet I retained a dread of all coquettish beauties who play with men's hearts as children with their toys. But this girl, so suffering and uncomplaining, stole into my heart during our first interview, and on the night of the fire the pang of mortal fear which I experienced as she leaped from the flames into my arms warned me of my danger. Then came a brief, sharp struggle.

"But Love conquered, as it always does when it is real the thing, and not a spurious article. So I resolved to woo Nerissa, and win her if I could. She was coy and reserved; sometimes she appeared to avoid me. But I never guessed that in honor she was bound to shun those vows I anxiously longed to plight.

"Infatuated, I disregarded the tokens by which she would have warned me, and offering her my hand, met with a prompt refusal. Since then I have schooled my heart until it beats for her with tender friendship rather than with love. If she were happy, I at least could be contented.

"And now that I have told you all, do you still believe that my marriage with Muriel could secure our mutual felicity?"

Mrs. Pennington considered for a few moments.

"Frankly, Alaric, I do not see why this vanished love-dream need interfere with your future, or prevent you from having a wife who loves you. You acknowledge that friendship has superseded a warmer feeling for Nerissa. In that case you are free to wed another."

There was a long pause.

"You said Muriel was in the library," said Alaric, at length. "Have I your permission

to seek her there, and offer such love as I have to give?"

She extended her hand and pressed the young man's warmly.

"Go to her, dear Alaric, with my blessing and best wishes," she said.

The library at Ravenhurst was one of the lower rooms in the west wing.

As Alaric went slowly down the long corridor leading to that part of the mansion, he saw coming toward him a tall, shabbily-dressed man, who was no member of the household.

He must just have descended the staircase, which was seldom used except by Nerissa and her immediate attendants, as it led to a suite of apartments specially appropriated to her private use.

The man was a gaunt, ill-favored fellow—at least, so thought Alaric, for his long shaggy hair and untrimmed beard gave him a neglected, half-wild appearance, which was not belied by his glittering eyes and scowling brow.

In his hand he held a purse, evidently containing gold, for it chinked as he tossed it with the sound given forth by that precious metal, while his other hand clutched fast a pearl necklace and gold chain, both of which Alaric remembered to have seen Nerissa wearing.

The doctor concluded, of course, that he was a burglar, especially when he saw him make an attempt at thrusting his ill-gotten booty into his breast.

Alaric seized him by the collar.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" he said.

The dark eyes glared fiercely; but there was no answer.

"You have no need to speak. You are a thief, a burglar, who shall be prosecuted with the utmost rigor of the law! Give up that money and those ornaments! Hol help there!"

The man began to struggle violently, but Alaric being taller and more muscular in build, succeeded in holding him fast, in spite of his frantic efforts to gain his liberty.

A faint cry was heard, an exclamation of distress, and Nerissa rushed down the staircase, and, pale as a lily, clung to Alaric's arm.

"Let him go!" she gasped.

"Let him go?" he repeated, in amazement. "Surely you do not know that he came to plunder—that even now your property is upon him, both money and jewels?"

"Yes, yes; I know!"

Involuntarily his grasp loosened, and the other, profiting by the chance, dexterously wrenched himself free, and dashed down the corridor.

Alaric would have followed in hot pursuit, but Nerissa's arms were around him, and the thrill of that first embrace—though thoughts of love were furthest from her mind—restrained him as powerfully as fetters of iron.

"He has gone," said he, as she released him. "Nerissa it was your fault; you should have let me follow him. What mistaken motives of compassion made you spare a thief?"

"He is no thief!"

"What is he then?" he laughed mockingly. Her face drooped upon her hands.

"Alaric, he is my husband!"

As he stood looking down upon the slender figure now convulsed with sobs, a great pity surged over his heart. It was worse for her, he thought, to be linked to the man who had but a minute before broken from his grasp than to be friendless and alone, as he saw her first in the great city.

Was she united to some escaped convict or notorious criminal, that he visited her thus secretly?

He longed to know, not from curiosity so much as kindly interest, but could not summon the courage to frame the question.

"You will not mention this encounter to your aunt or to Muriel?" she said, anxiously.

"Certainly not, except with your consent."

"Thanks, Doctor Treherne."

"But, Nerissa, do not be offended if I plead

with you as a friend to grant no more secret interviews to this man unknown to the rest of the household. Your fair fame might suffer. If he is your husband why should he not visit you openly, not like a thief?"

"There are reasons which you cannot guess."

"Oh, Nerissa! if I could only persuade you to confide in me entirely, I might be able to help you, for I know you suffer. Cast aside your doubts, and let me know the history of your marriage, and what chain of events united you to one whom you do not profess to love."

"You must not ask me," she said, hurriedly. "It is his secret, not mine, or I would gladly tell you. And do not condemn him too severely. He is not himself. He was once so different. Oh, it is very sad; but I think the troubles he has undergone have unsettled his brain, or he would not have come here to-night."

"He came, I suppose, for money," said Alaric, contemptuously. "He could desert you in your poverty, but now that wealth has poured in upon you, his visits will be more frequent. If it is his right to share your fortune, why does not he claim it openly?"

"There are difficulties we cannot overcome. He has never entered the house before, and probably never will again. I supply him liberally with money in order that he may keep away; but—but—" she broke off, fearing to say too much.

He moved away coldly.

"I see you prefer keeping your affairs wrapped up in mystery, and I am apt to forget that I have no right to meddle between man and wife. Excuse my pertinacity, Mrs. Lee. This is your own house, and you have a right to choose your own visitors. I will not detain you longer."

Sadly she turned and ascended the wide staircase. The cherubs painted on the old-fashioned ceiling seemed to look upon her compassionately, as if they longed to cast down the wreaths they carried, so that a few flowers might mingle with the thorns besetting her path.

Alaric pursued his way to the library.

When he opened the door Muriel rose from the couch where she was half-reclining, with outstretched hands and a bright glance of welcome.

If her head ached it did not affect the brilliancy of her beauty.

Her black dress was set off by a cluster of damask roses at the bosom, and another was placed with assumed negligence in her braided hair.

Something in Alaric's face assured her that triumph was near, and she rejoiced in the coming victory.

To win was Muriel's proudest ambition; to despise her rival when won, the natural outcome of a nature at once shallow and fickle.

Even when, seated by her cousin's side, she listened to the words which would have caused another woman's heart to beat with fond emotion, she was inwardly criticising his manner of wooing.

Cold and measured seemed his affection compared with that which had been lavished upon her by another, whom, she thought, she might have really loved had fate been kinder.

Why did the recollection of him flit across her brain at such a minute?

She dismissed it with a shudder; and, calling up one of the most bewitching smiles, murmured an acceptance of Alaric's suit.

CHAPTER X.

THROUGH DARKNESS TO LIGHT.

THE wedding was to take place early in the autumn.

There was no reason for delay.

Alaric, indeed, was no impatient bridegroom, and even hinted at the expediency of deferring his happiness until the second year of Muriel's widowhood was over.

But the lady smiled at his scruples, and Mrs. Pennington, whose health was delicate, ap-

peared anxious that the union upon which her heart was set should be solemnized without undue delay.

"Who can tell how short my time may be?" she said, with a sorrowful smile; "yet I do not wish to depart without being assured of your future happiness."

It had been a hard task for Nerissa to offer her congratulations, which Alaric received with a constraint which made it more embarrassing.

Muriel, on the contrary, was never tired of talking over every plan connected with the forthcoming auspicious event whenever she was in the society of her sweet Nerissa, for whom she warmed into a sudden affection.

Of course, she must be married from her mother's house in the city.

The wedding must be quiet, for such was Alaric's desire, and she liked to defer to his opinion; yet she was anxious to be dressed well and becomingly, so that she might look her best in his admiring eyes.

How shameful it was that people would stare if she appeared attired in white at her second nuptials! White suited her so well, and gray satin looked too old and matronly for a bride of four-and-twenty.

To such discourse Nerissa listened patiently for many weary hours, bravely trying to hide her wounded heart, and to assume an interest in the commonplace matters which to Muriel were of the highest importance.

When Alaric happened to be present, she was even more inclined to discuss the bridal arrangements, which, however, did not prevent her from keenly watching both him and Nerissa, whose unhappiness she more than suspected.

"Nerissa looks like a bride herself," she remarked one day when, the weather being warm, the young girl appeared in a dress of filmy texture and the pure hue of the lily. "Only fancy, Alaric, if she were so attired on our wedding morning; you might make a mistake, and carry her off to church instead of your own destined wife! Tell me now, would you be pleased or disappointed when you discovered your error?"

"I do not care to jest on serious subjects," answered he, frowning; while Nerissa turned away with an unwonted color on her cheeks, and a firm resolve to wear dark colors only until Muriel left Ravenhurst.

And now the last day of the prolonged visit was drawing to a close.

Early on the next morning Mrs. Pennington and her daughter were to set out on their journey to New York, whither, of course, Alaric was to escort them.

The three were walking on the lawn in the moonlight, enjoying the balmy freshness of the summer breeze, and talking over the amount of business which, in the ladies' opinion, must be transacted before the wedding could take place.

Nerissa, after presiding at dinner, had left them to their own devices, feeling, perhaps, that a future in which she bore no part would be more conveniently discussed in her absence, so Alaric was forced to give undivided attention to details concerning millinery, upholstery, wedding-cakes and breakfasts, with other matters still more void of interest to his masculine mind.

Muriel was just enunciating her sentiments upon the absolute necessity of securing a house so near the park that she could ride or drive there every day during the season, when one of the women servants came running toward them, with a white, scared face and dilated eyes.

"Oh, sir!—oh, ma'am! Such a dreadful business. I never was so upset in any respectable situation before. The police is in the house, and are going to search every room until they find him!"

"Find whom, woman? Speak plainer!" cried Alaric, impatiently, though his fears presaged the worst.

"I can't remember the name—I never heard

it before; but I think they mean mistress's husband. And, oh, Mr. Treherne, it seems he committed murder ever so long ago, and they've got a warrant out against him!"

"I always thought there was some disreputable story connected with that man," remarked Muriel, spitefully; "and it would not have surprised me to hear that he had forged a check, or embezzled money, or something of the sort; but really I did not suspect it was so bad as this."

"Where is Mrs. Lee?" asked Alaric.

"She is in her room in the west wing."

"These men will not intrude upon her there!"

"They said they were going to search the house," persisted the excited domestic. "He—the man—has been followed here; and, oh, what a dreadful thing this to happen in a family where a respectable girl is living as under-housemaid."

"Let us go to Nerissa," exclaimed the young man, hoarsely. "She may want her friends around her."

They were not long before they reached the house, where awe-stricken faces confronted them, and a general panic prevailed.

The detectives had already searched the principal lower rooms, and insisted on penetrating to Mrs. Lee's private apartments, where the fugitive was supposed to be concealed.

By patient investigation they had at last succeeded in tracing the miserable Everard Vaughan, under the alias William Lee.

They had discovered the marriage at Bridgeport, the subsequent voyage and return to America. Then they had followed his career, first as a billiard marker in a low tavern, afterward as supernumerary in the pantomime, until, often disappointed, but never quite losing the scent, they found he was sojourning in Dorothy Trent's cottage, and in constant communication with the mistress of Ravenhurst, who was identified as his wife.

When Alaric and his companions reached the elegantly furnished boudoir where Nerissa spent most of her leisure time, they saw her standing pale and erect before these respectable but determined-looking men who invaded her privacy armed with the dread powers of the law.

Her face brightened when she beheld Alaric.

"Doctor Treherne, will you send these men away?" she said, with the girlish simplicity which believes everything is possible to him she loves. "They demand the right to search my apartments, which I emphatically refuse."

"We have our warrant all regular," remarked the foremost stranger with composure, offering the document for Alaric's inspection. "Lady is naturally put out—most of 'em are when it comes to the point; but we have only to do our duty."

"I am afraid, Nerissa, we cannot defy the law," murmured Alaric, with white lips.

"And surely Mrs. Lee can have no desire to shield a man who is accused of having committed murder?" observe Muriel, in her clear, musical tones, while her eyes shone with malignant triumph.

Immediately the sound of struggling, and a confused murmur of voices, was heard proceeding from the inner chamber.

The door was flung open, and Everard Vaughan stood upon the threshold, old Dorothy clinging to his arm, and vainly striving to restrain him.

"Muriel, Muriel!" he cried, wildly, "I have desired to see you once more before I died, and the desire is now fulfilled. Oh, my beloved, look upon the ruin you have wrought with a tender tear of pity, and I will make no sign, but cheerfully lay down my life for your sake."

He threw himself on his knees at her feet, and buried his face in the folds of her dress.

The movement had been so sudden that every one stood transfixed with wonder.

"Muriel's face was livid as she uttered a piercing cry.

"Alaric! Alaric!"

Her betrothed hastened to her assistance.

"Unhand this lady! She does not know you!"

Everard's eyes literally blazed with frenzy.

"Yes, yes, she does! She remembers the old days at the Standard, when we acted together, and I first loved her. She had a husband then, but he is dead, and now no other man shall come between us!"

The detectives raised the wretched man, and clapped handcuffs on his wrists.

"Come, we've had enough of this. Once before you gave us the slip. You'll not have the chance of doing it a second time."

"The poor fellow is mad!" exclaimed Dorothy Trent, as they led him away. "I knew his brain was turned ever since the fever. That was why I followed him to-night when he rushed out of the cottage in one of his frantic fits. I thought harm would come of it."

Pale as marble, with lips firmly compressed, Muriel stood statue-like where Everard had left her.

Alaric took her hand, and it was cold as ice.

"Muriel, did this man speak truly? Has he ever been one of your friends or acquaintances?"

With a desperate effort, she found voice to answer.

"I have seen him before. And, Alaric, I never liked to tell you, for it was so sad, but my husband died no natural death. Everard Vaughan killed him."

She quailed and shivered under the horror-stricken gaze bent upon her; then, gathering courage, continued in a firmer tone:

"Yes, they quarreled, and George St. Aubyn was slain. You have possibly read the account given in the newspapers; but the names being different, prevented recognition. You know that in the theatrical world actors are seldom known by their real appellations, and in our case a change was especially necessary, as George was always in pecuniary difficulties, and we wished to avoid being followed by our creditors as we moved from place to place. It was under the name of George Trevelyan that he was passing when he met his death."

The cold, hard accents suddenly ceased, the forced composure gave way, and Muriel fell senseless at Alaric's feet, like one dead.

Everard Vaughan was never brought to trial. Death had long hovered over him, mind and body being alike diseased. He was spared the mournful alternative of enduring the terrors of the law or lingering out his existence as a confirmed lunatic.

Toward the end his mind grew more clear, and he wrote to Muriel St. Aubyn, desiring to see her.

This summons the lady thought proper to disregard, and thus committed an irreparable blunder.

Stung by her cruelty, Everard, in a fit of jealous rage, summoned Nerissa and Alaric to his bedside, and confessed the secret he had guarded at the peril of his life.

"Muriel has dared to disown me!" he murmured, in his weak, fast-failing voice. "She refuses a few parting words to a dying man; but she shall repent of her inhumanity."

"Listen, both of you."

"A word from me would consign her to the prisoner's cell, for by her hand St. Aubyn was slain!"

"He treated her cruelly, shamefully, until she learned to hate him. But he was jealous all the same; and though he made her go upon the stage, was forever on the watch lest another might win her favor."

"She and I often acted together at the Standard."

"George distrusted me—not without reason, for I passionately loved his beautiful wife, and fancied that her affections were mine. One evening she came secretly to my boarding-house in deep distress. Her husband had ill-treated, even struck her,

in his anger. There were bruises on her delicate face. She came to warn me that he threatened to inflict condign punishment upon me that very night in the green-room of the theater. She had scarcely faltered forth the words when we heard his foot upon the stairs, and, with savage imprecations, he vowed to break open the door if I did not allow him to enter. Muriel, terrified at his violence, concealed herself behind the window curtain, and I let him in. It seemed he had followed his wife, and seen her enter the house. He demanded to know where she was, and I was forced to stoop to falsehood, and deny having seen her. From words we soon came to blows, and fought like wild beasts together. St. Aubyn was a taller and stronger man than I. After a sharp struggle he flung me to the ground, and, rushing to the window-curtain behind which his wife cowered, dragged her forth in triumph.

"Then— How can I tell the rest? I saw Muriel snatch up a dagger, which lay with other things of mine upon a side-table—a quaint old dagger, which I had purchased at a curiosity-shop as being suitable for a part I was then playing—and in another moment St. Aubyn fell to the ground with a deep groan. 'What have I done?' cried Muriel, in an agony of fear.

"We heard voices outside. The people of the house were alarmed. The police would soon be upon us.

"You will be suspected, Everard," cried Muriel. "Let me hasten away through that door yonder, whence I can easily reach the landing and escape unobserved. You will not betray me, and it can never be known that the guilt is mine. Come what may, Everard, if you really love me, keep silent."

"Her cool selfishness and utter disregard of the danger I should incur dumfounded me, but I gave my promise, and she managed to quit the house unseen. My eyes seemed at once opened to her indifference, for had she not unconcernedly given me up to a felon's doom, perhaps to a shameful death to save herself from peril? I, too, fled, for nature revolted against the risk I ran by remaining with the corpse of the murdered man until the officers of justice came to seize me.

"But not for long did I elude their vigilance.

"Arrived at Bridgeport, whither I had journeyed on my way to Boston, I was taken into custody, and once more, in desperation, attempting to escape, was for the time sheltered through the compassionate kindness of this amiable girl."

He pointed to Nerissa.

Then, after a short pause, addressing her, he said:

"Very badly have I returned your kindness lately. But try to forgive me. My head seemed ever aching and throbbing beneath the pressure of a heavy burden. I scarcely knew what I did.

"Dorothy Trent, too, was eager for money, and hinted that if she were not well bribed it might be worth her while to tell all she knew. If the authorities had offered a reward for my apprehension that woman would long ago have betrayed me. But now it is beyond the power of man to harm me. Nerissa, you were never really my wife, for, with your concurrence, I married you under a feigned name.

"But it matters little now. Death will set you free sooner than the law."

Gently she soothed him with words of peace and pardon, owning that her reckless folly deserved a still more severe punishment.

Alaric would not have felt justified in believing his betrothed had committed so serious a crime on the unsupported testimony of poor, half-mad Everard Vaughan; but Muriel, when she heard of the interview, lost her presence of mind, and began to defend herself in a manner which carried a full corroboration of her former lover's statement.

Of course she could not expect to be Alaric's wife now he had once listened to this dreadful

charge; but if he promised never to divulge it to any human being she would go abroad and trouble him no more.

She had been a deeply-injured woman, and now her cousin and betrothed husband was secretly rejoicing that he had a decent excuse for breaking his word and marrying Nerissa.

Soon after she started with her mother upon a European tour, firmly resolved never to return to her native shores.

But wherever she wanders she will be tortured by a guilty conscience.

If the virtues of womanhood can atone for a girl's folly, Nerissa has long expiated the faults of the past.

As Mrs. Treherne she is respected by all who know her, and her husband calls her a perfect wife.

Dorothy Trent did not long enjoy her ill-gotten gains.

One night, in a state of semi-intoxication, she happened to set her clothes on fire, and before assistance arrived was burned to death.

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